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An illustration of a man in a Roman military uniform (Nero) embracing a woman in a red dress (Poppaea). The man has a white flower on his chest and a tattoo on his arm. The woman is looking up at him. The background is dark and textured.

THE RAVISHERS

IN NERO'S
EMPIRE OF LUST,
HER BODY WAS HER
ONLY WEAPON

JEANNE
DUVAL

A WOMAN'S PRICE

The price of Lysandra's falling in love was her being torn from her homeland of Gaul and sent to distant Rome.

The price of her virginity was a few coins of silver, contemptuously tossed to her by the legionnaire who had brutally used her.

The price of her staying off the streets was to please an Emperor for whom women held few surprises and little attraction.

The price of her vengeance was finally paid while a great volcano poured its molten horror over a Pompeian orgy of sensuality and slaughter.

This magnificent novel has all the adventure and excitement of Rome at her mightiest—and all the timeless anguish and burning courage of a woman whose love was too great to betray the man who had betrayed her...

THE RAVISHERS

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SHE WAS RAPTURE'S PAWN

Rome under the Emperor Nero. A city rife with imperial debauchery and seething with unrest. A jungle of intrigue where lying tongues spat out venom and there were no limits to appetite and ambition.

It was to this city of conquest and corruption that Lysandra came—an incredibly lovely young girl sold to slavery by the Roman general who had captured her heart . . . bought to stir the jaded desires of a ruler who had known too much pleasure too soon . . . and forced to fight for survival the only way she could, until she confronted the man she both hated and adored, and knew she had to join in either life or death. . . .

THE RAVISHERS

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THE RAVISHERS

by

Jeanne Duval



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PART ONE:

Rome, June 9, 68 A.D.

Chapter One

Sleep would be impossible tonight. The danger was too near. She suspected it would only be a matter of hours before the mobs in various parts of the city coalesced and decided upon a single plan of action.

Sandra remained dressed, if the silver-threaded imperial prostitute's gown could be called a dress. It revealed the pale flesh of her left shoulder, her slim waist, and her navel. Only months ago she would have talked of dying before she made such an indecent display of herself. It all seemed a long time past, as if it had happened to some distant ancestor in whom she had only a vague, sad interest.

She had stepped out of her silver-and-black sandals but was otherwise ready for flight or rape or other physical abuse, since such treatment had become a commonplace to her in the last few months. Hoping to forestall disaster before it arrived, she waited at a window deeply recessed in the stone wall of the imperial house.

She detested the muggy heat of a Roman summer night, so unlike the brisk June evenings she had known in Lutetia. Like Rome, Lutetia was a river town, but at this hour north-central Gaul would be shrouded in the silence of its great encroaching forests, whereas the Rome that spread out below her window seethed with violence tonight. She could make out clusters of torches in various city centers—at the top of the Sacred Way above the Old Forum, over on the Esquiline Hill where senators of the most ancient lineage had their homes, even at the great white temple of Jupiter Optimus

Maximus on the Capitoline Hill, where she suspected citizens of the richer sort were gathering behind those flaring torches.

This was a rich man's revolution against Emperor Nero, started by the conservative Roman Senate, deeply resentful of its own abdication from power and of the lives lost in recent conspiracies against the emperor. Few common people were involved. They still adored their singing emperor. Coarse and jolly, quick to laugh but very touchy, he had always seemed to be one of them and no aristocrat at all, in spite of his descent from the lines of both Augustus and Marc Antony.

There could be no doubt of it. In spite of the late hour, Rome was not sleeping tonight. While Sandra knew the horrors of revolution, she couldn't help being wryly amused that those senators and their hirelings among the Praetorian Guard were about to tear down what centuries had built up.

The Lady Lysandra, a Gallic princess looking forward to a respectable marriage in Lutetia only four months ago, would never have recognized herself in this half-naked young imperial slave whose black eyes widened with excitement at the prospect of Romans murdering each other.

But this mood quickly vanished as she pictured the fate of those who had befriended her in the palace, and she shivered in spite of the moist, warm air. The torches along the Sacred Way seemed to float in darkness, moving toward Victory Hill Street, which would bring them inexorably to the Palatine and the emperor's quarters.

She couldn't afford to wait any longer. Someone must force the emperor to take action and escape, if only to protect his mistress, Claudia Acté, that gentle freedwoman whose kindness had saved the life and sanity of the embittered slave Lysandra.

"I am trying to save Acté, not the Romans," she reminded herself as she stepped into her sandals and fastened them. "I can never repay Acté, but I can make a start tonight."

She took a long, enveloping gray cloak from its hook on the wall of the sleeping cubicle and hurried out into one of the great halls of Nero's new palace. Her light footsteps echoed on the exquisite mosaics of the floor, making her glance over her shoulder every minute to be sure the sounds were her own and not those of pursuers.

She took the narrow slaves' stairs at the end of the corridor two at a time and reached the floor above, which she found also deserted. The absence of the guards outside the huge double doors of the emperor's private quarters was an omi-

nous sign. Sandra pushed her way into the antechamber, sparsely furnished with a few elegant pieces, a hard, ebony bed with gold Corinthian scrollwork, a torchère from which three smoking oil lamps hung suspended, and a citrus-wood table. The room was unpleasantly humid, the single window embrasure covered by a heavy portiere.

Claudia Acté sat on the edge of the bed staring at the Damascus rugs covering the mosaic floor. Her thin hands clutched the scrollwork of the bed. She stood up abruptly as Sandra rushed in. Sandra read the strain and anxiety in her face.

"Lysandra! Are they coming?"

"I'm afraid so. But no one is yet near the small staircase." Sandra tried to throw the cloak around the older woman's tense shoulders, but Acté pushed it away.

"No! He needs a disguise more than I do. I'll wake him up. Poor boy! He was so sure his beloved Roman people would never betray him." She started for a small inner door beyond the long shadow of the torchère, adding with a touch of irony foreign to her nature, "Of course, it isn't the people who are his enemies."

In less harrowing circumstances Sandra would have found Acté's talk of the "poor boy" amusing. After all, Nero was thirty years old. But in his liberal youth, when he had ruled Rome more wisely than anyone since his ancestor Augustus, he had freed the slave woman Claudia Acté and offered her all the honors in his power. She refused the honors but continued to care for him during the years of his reign with an almost maternal passion, despite the three wives he acquired along the way.

Sandra waited nervously, torn by fear of the approaching mob and uneasiness at the silent halls she had come through. Clearly, Nero's guards had deserted or been bought off by the Conservatives in the Senate. The great majority of the legions would back the emperor to whom they had sworn allegiance, but there were few legionaries in Rome itself, and the elite Praetorian Guard within the city had proved corrupt and unreliable.

She heard voices raised in Nero's bedchamber. The emperor, aroused from his first deep sleep of the night, was protesting. Another male voice cut in then, the emperor's freedman friend, Sporus, a beautiful Greek whom Nero had cast as Hector in his musical play *The Burning of Troy*.

"Caesar, you haven't got a choice. They won't listen long enough for you to speak to them. Hurry!"

Sandra opened the little door into the hot, sybaritic splendor of the emperor's bedchamber. The room was much too crowded with furniture, chests, couches, tabarets, and backless cerule chairs, torchères, thick rugs overlaying even thicker rugs. Nero, whose weight had increased noticeably in the last two years, huddled in the middle of many oriental cushions like a Persian satrap of the old days.

He was heavily flushed. His flesh almost matched the fiery red of his tousled hair. He had been considered a good-looking youth with impressive strength, but the results of too much indulgence were everywhere apparent—the roll of fat easily seen beneath the summer night tunic he wore, the soft hands, once so strong at the reins of a chariot. Too much power, Sandra thought, and it now was about to kill him.

She came in, and he looked away from that devoted pair, Acté and Sporus, hoping to get different advice from this beautiful, raven-haired young newcomer who had also remained loyal to him.

"You. What do they call you? Lysandra! Tell them I can do it. I'll wear mourning and go before the crowds in the Forum, make a speech, admitting faults, giving them my word—whatever they ask. They might let me keep the governorship of Egypt. I don't want Rome and the empire. Not at the price of their disloyalty. My speech will sway them. I've always been a good actor. You remember, a month ago in Athens, Lysandra, how convincing my performance was, how they applauded, how they loved me."

She remembered the concert very well. General Vespasian, one of Nero's loyal commanders, had gone to sleep during Nero's recital. Watching the stout emperor play a dainty, pathetic Queen Dido was hardly conducive to sleep, but the general had just spent seven months in the field and might be forgiven for his failure to appreciate the emperor's artistry. Unfortunately, Nero hadn't seen it in the same light. For a minute or two it looked as if the sleeping general might be asked to slit his wrists.

For no reason except a natural human sympathy, Sandra, playing one of Dido's mourning ladies, had put on her own little performance, persuading the angry Nero that he had thrown even a rough, inarticulate soldier like Vespasian into a trance with the poignant quality of his voice.

The flattered emperor recovered rapidly from his pique,

and General Vespasian thereafter did all his sleeping on his army cot.

But there was no time for acting now. Sandra pleaded, "Caesar, the army itself is loyal. You must get to one of the legion camps outside the city. At once!"

He brightened, pushed aside the slave's cloak, and reached for the violet silk tunic laid out for him to wear the next day. "Of course. I'll go to the Praetorian camp. I must look my best. Impress them."

Acté, Sporus, and Lysandra cried with one voice: "No! Not the Praetorians." Stupefied by their unanimous panic and its implications, Nero ventured hesitantly, "Phaon, my accountant, has a villa on the Ostian Way. He was always loyal."

Sandra whispered to Acté, "is it true? Can he count on this Phaon?"

Acté said, "We must have faith." Whatever that meant. She was already draping the cloak around Nero's heavy shoulders. "Come, dear lord, we'll defeat them all yet."

Nero let himself be bundled into the cloak, the hood drawn forward, concealing his red hair and a part of the profile that was familiar to every Roman who had handled a coin.

While Acté arranged the hood, answering his nearsighted stare with her warm, comforting assurance, Sporus and Sandra exchanged nervous glances. They had both heard the grating scrape of a soldier's high laced boot on the floor outside the antechamber.

Sandra started to the antechamber. If the newcomer was a single guard, perhaps he could be sent on a chase in another direction. By this time Acté must have understood also, but she tried not to upset the emperor by any suggestion of panic. As Sandra opened the doors into the corridor she heard Acté in the emperor's room lose her calm for the first time. "No, no. It's too late for speeches."

Shaking her head, Sandra wondered why she and the others risked their lives and even more to save this silly fellow. The heavy doors opened too easily under her pressure. She found herself facing a huge Praetorian Guard, gleaming in his breast armor and helmet.

For an instant she thought in confusion that he was General Maximian, the man she held responsible for all the evils that had destroyed her happiness. But though the great passion of her life was her hatred of Maximian, who was Gen-

eral Vespasian's most trusted officer, she had never denied Maximian's great physical attraction.

On the other hand, this Praetorian Guard, bandy-legged, jowly, and sweating, was laughably unlike the legion commander Maximian. The guard tried to elbow her aside.

"I must see the emperor. Life and death."

She said quickly, "Caesar has gone to his Golden House," trying to send him in the opposite direction from that which they would take in getting the emperor out of the city.

He licked sweat off his short upper lip. "I've a message from the Senate . . . must deliver to Caesar."

Acté and Sporus appeared in the doorway of Nero's room, the actor trembling, but Acté her usual quietly confident self.

Rumor had it that Nero's most trusted confidante and one-time mistress occasionally attended meetings of the outlawed Christian sect. It was hard to believe this gentle woman could ally herself to a secret organization that had been seen to pray publicly for the destruction of "wicked Rome" during the Great Fire four years ago. Whether this shocking rumor about Claudia Acté was true or not, it meant nothing to Ly-sandra, who was learning at the age of eighteen to judge by actions, not gossip.

Acté said, "I know the Praetorian, Sandra. We can trust him."

The Praetorian was already stalking across the antechamber, headed for Nero, who had stumbled over the trailing ends of his cloak and all but fell into the Praetorian's arms.

"Good old Gaius! He'll protect us. He never failed me."

In spite of herself, Sandra had begun to feel twinges of pity for the wretched emperor. Especially for Acté's sake. These must be the most dreadful moments of her life. Sandra whispered to her, "We must go. Now!"

Acté nodded. She had her hand on Nero's arm, but the Praetorian had given Nero hope by saluting respectfully, his fist ringing against the metal of his breast armor.

"Caesar, the August Fathers of the Senate ordered me to deliver their ultimatum."

"Ultimatum?" Bewildered, Nero pulled his hands back from his onetime protector. After glancing around at the anxious faces of his few friends, he stiffened to a shadow of the dignity that went with his high office. His husky voice barked out one more command. "Speak."

"Caesar, the Senate declares you an enemy of the Republic. The Senate has sent messengers swearing allegiance to

General Galba in Spain. His army is on the march. General Otho has likewise sworn to support Galba as the senior general of the legions, and they expect word from General Vitellius on the Rhine at any hour."

Acté put in hopefully, "Who are the loyal officers?"

"Hard to say. Vespasian and his officers in Syria and Judea. Maybe some of the legion here in Italy. But none inside Rome."

Nero's flushed face went perceptibly white. "All this because I was absent from Rome for a few months?"

"Caesar, they say you have spent less time in Rome than any emperor since Tiberius. And your travels were all for pleasure. When you returned to Rome you were a danger to the senators—or so they say. If you had led an army, defended the nation . . ."

Not in thirteen years had Nero heard such an attack upon himself. He could hardly believe the scene was real. "I gave pleasure to hundreds with my travels. No. Thousands. You should have heard the applause when I recited. And I've passed clemency laws. I gave many men freedom from taxation. And after the fire I rebuilt Rome, made it a decent place to live in. I punished the fanatic Christians and other wrongdoers for their wickedness. What more could I have done?"

"Majesty, you demanded that many members of the Senate cut their wrists."

Nero's voice soared into falsetto in his desperation.

"But they were conspiring against me. Piso and his friends plotted my death. What else would you have me do?"

Helpless against arguments that meant nothing now, even if true, the Praetorian looked around at the two women and the shaken actor Sporus. He shrugged, spreading his big hands.

"Please, one of you, explain to Caesar. I offered to deliver the ultimatum because I once served the emperor. The Senate demands punishment according to the ancient form, and the Praetorians have sworn allegiance to General Galba. Caesar, you can avoid the ancient penalty. You must do it yourself. Before they come." He slapped the scabbard of his legion shortsword with its businesslike double edge. "Other brave men have taken this way out. Marcus Brutus used his sword. And Caius Cassius, Majesty."

Nero was trying to absorb this comparison with two men who had assassinated his ancestor Julius Caesar; so Acté

asked, "But what is the ancient penalty you spoke of?" Even her courage was shaken, Sandra thought.

The Praetorian was flustered. "Must I?"

Sandra went to the nearest window. Dozens of men moved up the last steps of Victory Hill. They were curiously silent. Not a mob, but a determined and terrible band. They would soon be roaming through the palace area. Torn by impatience at these delays and contempt for the Praetorian Guard's hesitancy, she couldn't resist taunting him, "The noble Praetorian has courage to deny his oath of loyalty to his majesty. Hasn't he courage enough to recite the consequences?"

Everyone looked scared, and the goaded Praetorian blurted out, "They strip the criminal. They place his head between the two arms of a furca. He is whipped to death. His body is thrown from the Sacred Tarpeian Rock. He is dragged to the Tiber with a hook and thrown into the waters. . . . Caesar, you mustn't let them do this. It is better to put an end to your own life, like a soldier."

Horried, with no words of comfort, they all awaited Nero's reaction. He was shaken but managed to draw himself up and deny fiercely, "No! There is still hope. Acté, you and Sporus, and the other—who are you? Yes. Lysandra. We will leave now, as you said. My army here in Italy is still loyal. They can defend me until Vespasian or his first officer, Maximian, gets here to rout these traitors. Quickly!"

Lysandra's chin went up at the mention of Maximian, the man she hated most in the world, but this was no time for old woes. While the Praetorian Guard stared, making no effort to stop their flight, the women hurried the emperor through the antechamber, followed nervously by Sporus. Sandra opened the big doors and ventured out into the wide, deserted corridor.

Acté grabbed up her own plain off-white palla, and threw it to Sandra. "You'll need something to cover your dress."

Wrapping herself in the yards of material, Sandra continued to run. She was surprised that she could still feel modesty over the display of her body. This whole flight was ridiculous. What did she care that the emperor might be murdered? Her interests, she convinced herself, were purely selfish. To save herself first, and secondly to save Claudia Acté, who had once rescued the desperate, enslaved Sandra.

The four of them hurried down the narrow steps into an obscure corner of the labyrinthine palace rebuilt by Nero after the fire. Not a single servant seemed to have remained in

the palace. Nor were there any loyal friends or any freedmen to help. The word must have traveled fast throughout the many buildings on the Palatine, which were connected by tunnels and corridors. Loyalty was not the strongest virtue of those who served the emperor.

The two women and two men made their way out of the palace and into an alley so black they had to feel their way along stucco walls, heading toward a stable at the foot of the hill where Sporus hoped they might find a wagon and horses to take them out of the city. Behind them now they could hear many voices, shouts, and roar of the Senate's hired mob. They fumbled their way onward down the hill, Sporus calling aloud upon the gods to protect them.

"Never mind the gods. Save your breath for the chase," Sandra muttered to Sporus.

Acté said, "Hush! We are coming to a pair of the *vigiles*. Don't mention names before the police."

"I'll throw myself on their mercy," Nero said suddenly. "I've always been good to them, seen that they were paid on time. Poor Tigellinus used to command them. I could use Tigellinus now. Do you suppose the police will remember that I gave them rewards for their conduct during the fire?"

Acté rolled her eyes, the only part of her face that Sandra could see, as she pleaded, "Say nothing, Caesar. Not one word." And when Nero would have objected, she added in a sharp whisper, "They are quite capable of tearing you to pieces. They all turn their coats with every breeze, and Tigellinus is dead. You cannot count on him."

The emperor made no more suggestions beyond murmuring a lost voice, "Why? Why has everyone changed overnight? I don't understand anything. Not anything at all. . . ."

Chapter Two

The two *vigiles*, whose chief duty was to fight fires and keep the peace, were obviously bored by inaction in this forgotten area of the Palatine Hill. They strode past the furtive little group. Nero stumbled again over the hem of his borrowed cloak, earning him and his companions unwanted attention. The two police stopped a short distance up the street. One of them called out, "Better get him home. We're in for rain and it looks like your friend's had a little too much to drink."

"Right, officer," Sporus answered in a shaky voice, while Acté complained with a fine pretense of irritation, "I told you not to give him that last goblet. I begged you. Now see what you've done."

Chuckling to themselves over the drunk and his nagging wife, the two *vigiles* strode on their rounds to inspect the streets for possible fires, though the mist, as they predicted, quickly turned to a short downpour of summer rain.

Half-soaked, the fugitives rushed to the stable, where their luck improved. A lean, middle-aged man whom Nero addressed joyfully as "my dear freedman Phaon" met them in the stableyard. He tried to salute, but Nero embraced him in a flurry of gratitude and goodwill.

"Majesty," the freedman began when he could get a word in, "I was on my way to the palace. I have a horse for you and a wagon for any that accompany you. It will be rough riding in the wagon. I suggest you mount the horse instead."

"My savior! But where can we go?"

"To my villa. It is only four miles outside the city on the Ostian Way. From there we can get you to the seaport by dawn. A galley will take you to Greece."

"They love me in Greece. I had my greatest triumph there. Dear Phaon!"

Acté put in, "We must hurry, Caesar."

"To be sure." Usually an excellent horseman, Nero tried

and failed to mount. Together, Sporus and Phaon managed to boost him up on the mare's back. He took the reins, strongly inclined to gallop off, but recollected his companions just in time. Phaon helped the women into the wagon. As he had predicted, the wagon was exceedingly uncomfortable. It had formerly been used to carry cement into the constantly building city. Sporus scrambled in and Phaon came after.

In spite of the rattle and grind of metal wheels over the cobblestones, Lysandra was relieved. At least they might get out of the city. But so many disasters had befallen her since the end of her girlhood and freedom four months ago in Lutetia that she expected trouble even now when the horse and wagon passed through the Ostian Gateway without challenge from the guards on duty. The guards were discussing General Galba, the Senate's choice for the next emperor.

Meanwhile, flashes of summer lightning illuminated the wagon and the horse and rider. Nero kept fidgeting around on the mare. He complained of the discomfort, and Phaon quietly reminded him, "It is better than dying on the Palatine, Caesar."

Too late, Acté whispered, "Hush!"

One of the guards came up to the horse and wagon. A flash of lightning showed them the rider's pale, heavy face. The guard blinked, started to say something, and bit his lip. One of his companions called out, "What's wrong? Are they carrying contraband?"

While the fugitives held their breath, the guard hesitated. Then he said, "No. Just heading out of the city. Can't say I blame them."

One of the other guards called, "What news of the emperor?"

"The people are coming out in his favor," Sandra announced daringly. Her full lips smiled at the friendly guard. The guard grinned at her, winked, and waved them on.

"Good luck to him," he said in a low voice.

His comrades, however, were joking with each other. "Nero's probably cut his wrists by now."

"Ay. Either the Senate or the Praetorians will see to that."

"Well then, it'll be 'Hail Galba' by dawn. Know anything about old Galba?"

Nero kicked the heels of his sandals into the sides of the patient mare. One of his sandals fell off, but the wagon rattled outward into the marshy countryside between the capital city and Ostia, its seaport. Nero raised his head, looked

around, and seemed to recognize the road. He was greatly relieved.

"As Phaon says, there are sure to be several galleys in the harbor. Any one of them could take me," he remarked to Acté. "I'm safe once I'm at sea. The Greeks love me. And the Alexandrians."

It was quite true. Sandra had heard talk on the Palatine of the emperor's fantastic popularity among the common people of other countries under Roman domination. Everyone began to cheer up. But Phaon reminded them, "Caesar must get there first."

Unfortunately, he was right. The wagon wheels wobbled badly over the heavy, much-traveled cobblestones, and Sandra began to wonder if they would ever reach Ostia, particularly in this wagon. For her own sake she very much hoped they would. At a seaport there was always a chance to escape. Sandra had learned many tricks, including survival, during the past four months, and at this moment she had no idea what would happen to the imperial household of slaves if Nero died.

While the summer downpour slackened to a light mist, the right front wagon wheel made a rasping noise as it caught between two broken cobblestones. The next minute Phaon, Sporus, and the two women were thrown over to the right on top of each other. Nero snapped the whip, the horse plodded on, and the wheel was wrenched off its axle.

The wagon did not overturn but lay with its right side propped against a series of high paving stones above the wheel ruts. Phaon leaped to the ground, which was covered with nettles and weeds.

Apparently, Nero preferred not to hear the details of their disaster. He dismounted before Phaon could help him and, minus one sandal, limped to the side of the road, then started aimlessly into the fields. Phaon gave the others a hand as they crawled out of the wagon and followed the emperor.

Luckily, Phaon's little farmhouse was within sight. A servant had lighted lamps on the ground floor. They gleamed from several tiny embrasures, and the situation looked more hopeful to Lysandra, whose recent experiences had made her cynical about any form of good luck. She respected Phaon more than the others. At least he had a plan.

"We should rest at my house," Phaon suggested. "Before dawn we will start for Ostia."

No one was in a position to deny him. Nero, meanwhile,

had stepped into a clump of nettles and was groaning with pain. He sat down in the field and pulled out a thorn, and then, finding ditchwater within reach, he scooped up the dirty water and drank thirstily. Sporus presented his shoulder for Nero to use as a crutch while Acté tore a strip from the sleeve of her gown and wrapped the emperor's bleeding foot. With an effort Nero stood up and hobbled on.

Suddenly, Phaon stopped and extended his arm in front of them. Sandra could see several figures shuffling in front of the rectangular farmhouse, which, like many homes in southern Italy, was built around a garden and peristyle.

"My farm bailiff and one of my house servants," Phaon whispered, adding, "and someone in uniform."

Nero showed signs of renewed panic. "I know the man in uniform. A courier from the Senate."

"There is a small rear door. We will have to crawl along the base of the wall. Otherwise they may see our shadows when we cross under that window."

Phaon went ahead, followed by Nero on all fours, then the women and the actor Sporus, who muttered vainly, "Too late. They are sure to find us."

Once inside the little garden door, Phaon led them across a corner of the garden to a windowless cell used as a bedchamber by extra field slaves in autumn.

Sporus, the actor, was shocked. "You can't expect the emperor to rest here. It's a pigsty. Look at this dirty coverlet and that bolster. It must be made of wood."

Phaon said sharply, "It is this or suicide. There will be no other choice if he is captured."

Acté tried to silence the bickering while she and Sandra straightened the bedclothes. Then Acté took Nero's shaking hands. "Sit here and rest."

He sighed but obeyed with surprising docility, murmuring, "I won't have to kill myself . . . will I? They won't make me do that."

Phaon, who had started to the door, turned back. Sandra was made even more uneasy by the sudden contempt in the face of a man who had been kind and charitable until this minute.

"Caesar, a man would do it rather than be taken to Rome for sentencing." Seeing that he hadn't gotten through to the emperor, whose mind appeared to wander, he shrugged and wasted no more breath on protests.

Sandra did what she could to make the wretched emperor

comfortable, and found her icy bitterness thawing before this spectacle of suffering in another human being. Her own fall from security and happiness to slavery had been nothing compared to the fall of Emperor Nero. And like herself months earlier, he couldn't understand what had happened to him.

He rubbed his jaw, flicked his tongue over trembling lips. His nearsighted green eyes tried to focus on something reassuring from his old life. Inevitably, he sought out the woman who had never ceased to be faithful to him.

"Acté, I'm so thirsty. . . ."

Phaon returned with a piece of black bread. "Sorry. Didn't want to be seen by my servants. This is all I could find."

Sandra, who was nearest, took the bread and offered it to the emperor. Nero clutched the bread, bit off a chunk, and tried to chew. He gave up.

"Dry throat. Water, please." The bread fell. No one bothered to pick it up. Acté had found a basin of brackish water and raised it to his lips. He drank greedily.

A shadow crossed the doorway. Seeing Acté's horror, Phaon and Sandra looked around. A house slave in a long Greek chiton stood there staring at the emperor. Behind him the breast armor of a Praetorian caught the light from a swinging oil lamp in the passage. Acté screamed, her first real acknowledgment of fear. Sporus tried to crouch in a corner and disappear. Sandra had put her arm out instinctively in front of Nero. It was very little protection, and she had a numb certainty that murder would be done. During these terrible minutes the knowledge even erased her fears for her own fate.

Phaon sprang toward the slave. "Traitor! By the gods, I'll sell you to the mines."

The tall Praetorian got in his way. Lysandra watched the officer, knowing there would be no pity in that hard, arrogant face. One hand rested on the shortsword at his side; the other, with the fingers spread flat, pressed against Phaon's breast.

"Enough. This man is an enemy of the Republic. My cohort can be called in. If you insist, I will bring reinforcements."

Phaon, weakened perceptibly, backed off.

The Praetorian grinned. "That's better. Now then. We take the prisoner back to trial and execution." Acté gasped. The

Praetorian added, "Or—he dies here. By his own hand. Like any brave Roman. What do you say?"

At a gesture from the Praetorian the house slave, whose hands had been concealed in the folds of his gown, now held out two poniards.

Nero cringed from the blades. "No! My people love me. They will never forgive you." He looked from face to face, seeing anguish in Acté's eyes but only pity or expectation otherwise. The slave offered the poniards again. Fumbling badly, Nero accepted them but let them dangle in weakened fingers. Moistening his lips, he asked plaintively, "Will no one show me the way?"

Obviously shocked at his cowardice, Phaon repeated in an incredulous voice, "*show you, Caesar?*"

"You all loved me only minutes ago. Isn't there one who will go before me? Give me courage and a companion? . . . Not one?" Nero held out one poniard, then the other. Only Acté, as if in a dream, reached for the blade. Sandra stopped her.

The Praetorian's smile curved to a sneer. "How brave our Caesar is!"

The taunt finally revived the courage that had been Nero's finest asset as a youth. He drew himself up with a pathetic parody of that imperial pride.

"I am a Roman. My ancestor, Marc Antony, knew how to die. But I will not have my—my corpse defiled." His own words instilled courage in him. He motioned the others ahead of him, out of the little sleeping cubicle.

Puzzled, they obeyed him as they had obeyed the orders of the all-powerful emperor only a day before. Acté was white and silent, but she walked beside him as he stalked out into the passage. Trailing in their wake with Sporus, Sandra thought that after fourteen years Claudia Acté had finally taken her rightful place as Nero's wife and partner. Ironical that it should be only minutes before his death. At the same time she wondered if Nero could keep his courage.

"What will happen to us after?" Sporus whispered to Sandra.

What indeed? Would the emperor's slaves be put to death because they had remained loyal to him?

It can't happen, Sandra insisted to herself, trying to drown the frightful doubts. The gods couldn't be so unfair.

But of course, they were often appallingly fair. Tonight

they were about to collect a terrible debt accumulated by the emperor for "crimes" of which she herself knew little.

"What do you intend, Caesar?" the Praetorian demanded as he stepped out along the passage before the emperor. The others noted that his voice and manner had acquired an edge of respect.

Nero reached for the door latch. Phaon opened the door. Facing a curtain of mist, the emperor started back, blinked, then plunged out into the unplowed field. The others circled around him, shivering in the dampness, still uncertain as to how far he would go. Sandra wondered how she could throw off pursuit if she broke away from this deathwatch now. Nero faced the Praetorian. His voice was surprisingly strong.

"My body must be washed afterward." He laughed with a hysterical edge that further unnerved them. "That should be easy with this rain. Then it must be burned in the Roman way so that it will not be profaned after my . . . afterward."

Acté cried his name softly. He pressed her hand. She felt the dagger in his palm and kissed his cold hand. He knelt in the mud, dropped one dagger, and, taking the other in both hands, turned the blade upward toward his breastbone.

"Lower, Caesar," the Praetorian advised coldly.

It was the final straw. Nero broke into sobs.

"I can't. I can't. Don't you see? To kill such an artist is a crime against—against nature."

He was unaware of anything outside himself. The others heard sounds on the road. Sandra looked up, saw a dozen horsemen turning off, making their way across the fields.

Phaon leaned over Nero. "Hurry, Caesar! They are coming for you."

Nero brought up the poniard again, pressed its point into the flesh below his breastbone, crying brokenly, "What an artist dies in me!" But he could go no further.

Sandra watched the horsemen. She was shaking almost as badly as the emperor. Would they murder her and Acté? She tried to run, to save herself and to avoid the horror of the emperor's death. But the Praetorian had moved, and she was caught between him and Sporus, who looked as if he might faint.

The Praetorian officer reached for the kneeling figure. Phaon stopped him. "I'll do it. They won't drag him back to degradation. After all, he was the last of the true Caesars." He put both hands around Nero's grip on the dagger. He gave a sudden, fierce shove that carried him forward with the

dagger. Nero's shriek was echoed by a cry from Acté. The blade buried itself to the hilt in his body. Blood spurted over Phaon, who tried to help Acté as she eased the dying man to the ground. Nero opened his eyes, gazed at Phaon. Bloody foam rimmed his lips.

"Is this your loyalty?"

He was still staring when he died. Acté closed his eyes gently.

Seconds later, as Sandra turned away, hoping to escape unnoticed, the horsemen arrived, churning mud and circling the little group. Before she had taken three steps, one of the Praetorians reached down and with powerful hands under her breasts, lifted her up before him on the padded back of the horse. Instinctively, she struggled, hating herself for letting her panic make her ridiculous, like a desperate feline. The horseman called to his fellow Praetorians in a jovial, teasing way that kept her shivering.

"Here's a pretty morsel. She'll reward us for missing the kill."

"Not so!"

Even Sandra was startled by Claudia Acté's stern voice. The mounted Praetorian looked down.

"Lady Acté? Is she your property? Well, she's worth an evening's pleasure. What do you say to a gold piece? Got it fresh from the Senate, only hours ago. Tomorrow you may have her back. Nothing fairer than that."

Sandra swiveled her head around, tried to bite the Praetorian's hairy upper arm. He cuffed her in a casual way but frowned at Acté's further warning.

"She is imperial property. She will be transferred to the household of Emperor Galba."

The Praetorian snorted. "Now, what will that old goat do with a delicious tidbit like this? He's long since forgotten what they're good for."

But the small, haggard woman simply looked at him. The blood of the dead emperor made a curious spiral pattern on her soiled white gown. Slowly, under her gaze, the Praetorian lifted Sandra off the horse, let her slide through his fingers until her muddy sandals touched the ground. She was shaking so much she could barely whisper her thanks to Acté.

Meanwhile, Phaon and the original Praetorian officer had gathered dry wood from a shed attached to the garden wall and started a funeral pyre while Phaon's other slaves slipped out of the farmhouse and wrapped the body in sheets. As the

flames leaped high, spattering in the mist, Sandra stared into their red-orange depths. The death of the emperor brought back all too clearly the death of her father and the end of her own happiness four months ago.

Surely more than four months!

It seemed a century ago as she remembered it now in the drizzling June night.

PART TWO:

*Lutetia, Province of Upper Gaul,
February, 68 A.D.*

Chapter One

. . . Four months ago in Lutetia, that prosperous river town founded by the Parisii tribe in Northern Gaul, and now under Roman protection. A blue-sky day in February, so deceptively bright everyone on the busy left bank of the town went around remarking, "Winter is over."

Judging by this weather, the omens should be lucky for the young Lady Lysandra, who had arrived at the Roman gateway of Lutetia shortly after dawn that morning. She had journeyed almost the length of Gaul, starting in Massilia, the great Mediterranean seaport, by means of a cramped but elegant traveling carriage, for whose hire her father, Perseus, had sent an unexpected gift of golden auriæ. It was hard to believe a simple scribe could have made so much money in six months. But her father was very good with figures, and he explained that his new employer, General Maximian, governor of Northern Gaul, had given him the golden reward for uncovering discrepancies in the army payroll lists.

It was seven months since Perseus had left his daughter, her body-slave, Daphne, and a cook-housekeeper at Massilia and gone to make his fortune in Upper Gaul. His former patron, the customs master of Massilia, had recommended him for the new post, which paid considerably more, with headquarters in the lively little river town of Lutetia.

Thanks to the hire of the four-wheeled wooden carriage and four guards riding horseback to bring his daughter safely up the length of Gaul, Lysandra's arrival with her slave,

Daphne, was suitably impressive to the Roman legionaries lounging on duty. One of the soldiers examined the little scroll presented by the leading horseman and, pulling back the heavy curtains of her carriage, looked at her with even more interest than her beauty aroused.

"Well now, Princess Lysandra. It says here your mother was the daughter of the last Gallic chieftain who took the field against us . . . and a tough old rascal he was."

Lysandra's dark eyebrows curved with a hint of the pride that had been instilled in her as a child by her mother, who despised all things Roman.

"My mother's father was a tough soldier, yes. But he and my mother died long ago. I live with my father, who—"

"A Greek, it says here. Confidential secretary to our governor, General Maximian. . . . But not a Roman citizen."

Knowing the importance of acquiring Roman citizenship, Lysandra said quickly, "He has written me that he will soon apply for citizenship, through his service to the governor of Lutetia."

In her anxiety to convince him she leaned forward and the furred cloak that covered her fell away, revealing her figure in its crimson wool gown that molded her high, round breasts, her lithe waist and hips. Nor did the legionary miss her bare ankles in their crimson leather sandals. Their beauty alone was worth being preserved in marble, he thought.

She wore her shoulder-length hair in two thick plaits, braided with pearls. Unlike many blond Gallic women, her hair was black as the kohl worn by fashionable ladies to outline their eyes. The legionary was not immune to these charms, or the temptation of her wide, sensuous lips.

But she was connected, though indirectly, with his commanding officer, General Maximian, and the legionary knew better than to try anything "Max" didn't sanction. After all, General Max was married to the daughter of General Vespasian, who reached pretty high in the imperial hierarchy. Maximian's easy manner and cool courage under fire sometimes fooled a new army recruit into thinking he was lax about the rules. But the hard steel was there, and something a stranger might call arrogance. You didn't fool around too close to Max. The only one who did was that golden harlot his wife.

The legionary waved away Lysandra's hired bodyguards and saluted her. "Run along, Gallic princess. My best to General Max."

Lysandra didn't bother to tell him she had never met her father's employer. She was sophisticated enough to know the importance of having acquaintances in high places.

Relieved that there were no problems, she left the curtain open in order to watch all the sights as the travel carriage rattled beyond the last elaborate tomb of the necropolis and onto the cobblestones of the town proper. She had never seen Lutetia before. She was astonished at the clean, neat, very Roman town. The forum on the left of the highway was quite as attractive, and almost as busy, as the main commercial district of Mediterranean Massilia.

"Look, Daphne! Two public baths. And over to the right, an amphitheater for plays. How wonderful!"

Her pretty, vivacious maid, Daphne, had been busy making eyes at a young trader whose legs were wrapped in Gallic breeches and who wore his yellow hair braided down his back. Lysandra nudged her impatiently.

"Am I talking to myself?" Then she saw the yellow-haired Gaul and laughed. "I might have known. A man. Any man."

Daphne giggled. "Look at his long mustaches. Did you ever see anything so magnificent?"

"I like them clean-shaven."

"Only Romans are clean-shaven, my lady."

Lysandra said airily, "Well, if he's very handsome, I'll forgive his ancestry."

"They say your papa's General Maximian is handsome, my lady."

It was true. Lysandra had been warned by her friends in Massilia that she must be careful not to appear "immodest" and invite the attentions of the popular Maximian, or of any man she met, since she was all of seventeen and they might assume she was highly experienced. Few young ladies in the Roman provinces were still unmarried past the age of fifteen. She was grateful to Perseus that he hadn't arranged a marriage for her. She knew her own weakness, which she inherited from her oversexed father. The difference was that she had only "loved" from afar.

At fourteen she had idolized a handsome Greek dockworker whom she had seen only once, when she visited her father's office on the docks. At fifteen she thought she would die if she couldn't marry a distinguished Roman senator who had dealings with the customs master of Massilia. Then, only last year she had been sure her whole future was bound up in the strange, secretive Druid cult of her dead mother's

people. Religion would supersede her interest in men. But the aged religious leader had taught his acolytes that the gods called for the destruction of Great Rome, hardly a practical consideration. He demanded that every obol, every drachma and sesterce be collected in order to build up an army for his purposes. Nothing much had happened, except that whispers began concerning the accumulating personal wealth of the old Druid priest. It was this that discouraged Lysandra and made her decide she preferred her passions less involved with blood and profit.

Daphne went on repeating what she had heard, that General Maximian was idolized by the ladies of Rome and, perhaps because of this, seldom shared his wife's bed. It was an intriguing note.

During her girlhood, Lysandra had asked many questions of her friends, and though a virgin, she was mentally equipped with all the requisite facts.

She had learned not to rely upon her father. He was generous at odd times, overgenerous with money, which he loved to throw around. But he was miserly with his time for his daughter. He was much more interested in his frequent love affairs than in his only child. She knew she had often been a handicap in his pursuit of younger women. He had remarked once in a letter to his tolerant, worldly-wise daughter that his romantic record far exceeded that of his new patron, Maximian. And such men seldom paraded grown daughters before their fair mistresses. So why was he rushing her up to Lutetia now?

Lysandra reached along the interior of the carriage to the little counter dovetailed into the space over the foot of her couch. She took her father's beautifully printed letter out and unrolled it to read again, but got no fresh clue:

"Perseus to his daughter Lysandra, Greetings." Followed by the formula, "If you are well, it is well with me." Then the strange rush of emotion: "Come and visit me at once. I need you. There will be great changes. I can say no more, except that a goddess has come into my life and will be in your life as well, the gods willing. Farewell, until we meet."

She obeyed him because she had been taught respect for her family, but she was sure his "goddess" would be just another love affair, and probably ended by the time she reached Lutetia.

The carriage rattled along the highway that cut straight through the thriving left-bank city, over a heavily reinforced

bridge to the largest of the river islands, where the imposing Roman headquarters loomed up on the horizon. The highway then crossed another bridge to the marshy right bank and ran onward north and west to the Channel and the island of Britain.

"To the ends of the earth," Lysandra murmured, her dark eyes gleaming with excitement as she pointed out the spot on the far horizon where the highway vanished. But Daphne's imagination was more prosaic.

"Barbarians, that's all. And everything snow and ice."

Her last words were drowned by shouts, hoofbeats, the screech of timbers splitting, all the familiar noises of a traffic accident. Lysandra looked out again. They were halfway across a main intersection of the town, and Lysandra's horsemen had run into a wagon and a solemn, white-robed procession. She recognized with a shock that a Druid priest was at their head. There had been so much gossip lately about human sacrifices, weird rites, and the incredible mental powers of the Druid cult that Lysandra could hardly associate Hellas, her previous idol, with their practices.

She called to Alanis, the grizzled leader of her escort.

"What is it? Can't we go on?"

"There's a fight, my lady. Some Roman soldiers and the locals."

"They're all attacking those poor Druid priests?"

"No, my lady. The locals got the word from the Druids, and tried to attack two legionaries. Mighty good fighters, those Romans. Only two against the mob."

Lysandra leaned farther out of the carriage, shocked at such a lack of fair play. But sure enough, two tough, stocky Roman footsoldiers seemed to be having the time of their lives fighting back to back, slashing, cutting, and thrusting with their shortswords as a score of local Gallic citizens stoned or clubbed them. Lysandra found herself indignantly on the side of the besieged Romans, against her own people.

"Can't you do something? Alanis, tell the others to help them."

Alanis scratched his head. "Help the people, my lady?"

"No, no! The Romans, of course." Even as she spoke she could see that the robed and hooded Druids had broken their procession and were mingling with the mob, whispering, nudging, pointing. She was sure they were urging their fellow Gauls to further violence.

"A good thing I stopped going to those Druid ceremonies,"

Lysandra muttered to Daphne. She might have saved her breath. The maid was clapping her hands in delight at the excitement. There was no use losing one's temper at Daphne, Lysandra knew. The girl was born with very little discrimination or intelligence, and that little she did have was channeled toward capturing the heart of any male who came into the radius of her undeniable charms. Daphne's answer was punctuated by her sexy giggle, which often annoyed Lysandra for reasons Lysandra preferred not to analyze.

"Oh, my lady! They'll drive those nasty old Romans clear down to Rome."

"I'd prefer that to having them massacred before our eyes. Alanis, *do something!*"

Thus prodded, the leader of her escort motioned to the other horsemen. The four formed an impressive line against the pedestrian street fighters and moved forward, their horses head to head. The horses were already plunging among the fighters when the bullying mob began to retreat amid yells and shrieks. One of the Romans had fallen to his knees but was still hacking away. The other, still on his feet, had done considerable damage, judging by the blood on the breeches and clothing of the Gauls. Lysandra made out the white-robed Druids still busy among the now disorganized crowd. She had no doubt they were trying to stop the rout. After this display she understood better why the Romans talked of outlawing the Druid cult throughout Gaul.

There was also the courage of the two Romans to consider. Unlike Daphne, she had been much impressed by the sight of two men laughing, fighting, drawing blood and being blooded by a cowardly mob ten times their number. A few local men were still throwing stones and debris as they backed away from Lysandra's mounted escort when Lysandra saw a Roman on horseback ride up from the direction of the stone Palace of Justice on the biggest island in the river. He wheeled his skittish stallion around through the retreating crowd, moving slowly as if daring the Gauls to attack him or his mount.

Daphne leaned over Lysandra's shoulder. "Oh, it's a Roman commander. Now, we'll see some fun. I hope he's not hurt. How handsome he is!"

Only one daring boy had the nerve to throw a broken amphora at the mounted Roman, who was an imperator, commander of a legion, as Daphne's eagle eye ascertained. Lysandra wondered if he could possibly be her father's em-

ployer, General Maximian. She had pictured the general as much older. This imperator was hardly thirty-five, perhaps younger. She heard him give an order—"Clear the street!" He seemed to exert no particular force or effort in the command, but surprisingly, he could be heard from all four corners, and was obeyed immediately.

One of the rescued legionaries, laughing as he wiped his bloody shortsword against his bare thigh, hailed the commander informally and saluted.

"Greetings, General Max. Better late than never, I see."

With a reluctance Lysandra could only lay to her ancestral dislike of Romans, she admitted to herself that Daphne's nice judgment of males hadn't deserted her.

General Maximian was a handsome man, especially with that easy grin as he answered the jibe. "How did I know you needed help against only fifteen or twenty civilians? You've gone soft, Enobarbus."

The two Roman legionaries sheathed their swords and went swaggering on toward the river and their barracks. Lysandra was amused to see that the one who had gotten a bad slice across the knee could swagger even with this disadvantage. Meanwhile, General Maximian rode up to Lysandra's leading escort, Alanis.

"Many thanks. You've done us a good turn." He looked over the fancy traveling carriage with its expensive curtains lined with velvet, and the two beauties peering out at him. "You aren't from around here, I take it."

"No, excellence. We are from the south, bringing the Lady Lysandra to her father, who is the governor's private secretary."

"Ah. So that's it." The general rode over to the girls and saluted them with the flat of his sword against his plumed helmet—a bit exaggerated, Lysandra thought, but an attractive gesture, all considered. "So you are Perseus' daughter. I must say, you live up to his high praise, Lysandra."

"I was happy to be of service, commander. Your men obviously needed help."

It was a hit at the supposed superiority of the Romans, and she wanted to annoy him. It had grated on her pride to be addressed so unceremoniously, without the courtesy of a title. She began to find fault with him. Not such a special-looking fellow, after all. Taller than the average Roman, but not the height of many Gauls she knew, though he carried himself well and had excellent features without quite dazzling the be-

holder. His expression was winning, an effect of the amusement in his greenish eyes and the attraction of his mouth, which Lysandra stared at in spite of herself. It was seldom that anyone of his rank retained much tenderness and vulnerability; yet she admired his lips for these very qualities.

Probably a carefully cultivated mask for his sensual Roman appetite, she told herself, noting that he seemed very sure of his attraction for women. But she found it difficult to keep from smiling back at him as he took her sharp dig in good part.

"I hope, if I need help, you will be so obliging. I am Maximian, the governor of this benighted place."

"Really? I had no idea." This time they both laughed, and he gave his stallion a slight indication along the reins. The fierce-looking animal obligingly trotted beside the carriage while Maximian asked about her journey and how long they would have the pleasure of her company.

Just in time she caught herself before blurting out that she had come in answer to her father's mysterious summons. She said instead, "My father may be planning to marry me off to some young man of Lutetia."

"So you are to be married." His eyebrows raised slightly. "Lucky man. Not one of us, I take it. We aren't that lucky."

"Not a Roman." She added, "We are not Roman citizens. My mother was very proud of her Gallic heritage."

"Still, Roman citizenship can be handy. I hope you need never know how handy." He had added this lightly, but she knew the truth of it. Without Roman citizenship one might as well be a barbarian, which, in all likelihood, was how proud Romans thought of her and her Greek father. Seeing her frown, he changed the subject. "You will be a gift from the gods to my wife. She is always complaining about having been cast away in the company of old crows." He said this with a twist to his mouth, as if he made fun of his wife, or of himself. She couldn't be sure which.

"I hope my company will at least keep her from being bored."

This time there was no mistaking his sarcasm. "A beautiful Gallic female should be a treat for her, with only Gallic males around the palace."

Perseus, her father, seldom spoke of the general's wife, except to say that the Lady Ancaris, illegitimate daughter of that great soldier General Vespasian, was the most beautiful woman in the empire. A golden-haired goddess. But then,

Perseus always had an eye for good-looking women. Fortunately, he reported that she was cold and aloof.

She was reassured by the ease with which General Maximian discussed her father, praising his diligence and saying, "I am no mathematician. I leave that to clever Greeks like your father. Here in Lutetia we borrow our soldiers from General Vitellius' legion on the Rhine, and that requires bookkeeping, paymasters, all the tedious business of accountants."

She smiled at this typical view of a soldier. "And it has nothing to do with a general who just happens to govern a province?"

He reached across the space between them and tapped her hand with his forefinger while Daphne, watching them, stifled a giggle.

"Admirably argued. I couldn't agree with you more."

Lysandra had enjoyed their brief contact much more than she thought possible. There was an exciting masculinity about him that always appealed to her. She was not so different from Daphne, after all, she admitted to herself.

The highway descended an easy grade to the bottom of a hill, where the big Roman bridge connected the left bank of the city to the island in the river where the Romans had built their administrative palace, solid, rectangular, rising at least three stories above the "prow" of the island. The dirty-green river was crowded with traffic even this early in the morning. Barges moved upstream, and small boats propelled by oars crossed the river to both right and left banks, tying up among the reeds that still grew wild in less populous places along the shores.

General Maximian pointed out one of the barges with its battered sides and a cargo piled so high with lambs' wool and hides from Britain that it almost overbalanced the heavy deck.

The sunlight flashed on the metal greave that protected the commander's arm. Lysandra decided in spite of herself that it was a handsome, muscular arm very like the man himself. Whatever softness there was about him was in his expression as he looked at her. She couldn't help being pleased by this mark of his interest in her.

"Those are the true rulers of Lutetia. The bargemen. Their guild just struck again for higher costs. Brought the whole city to a standstill. But they got their raise, the second since

last fall. Of course, the price of everything in town immediately jumped a few more sesterces."

"Does the emperor approve all these conditions?" she asked. Not that she cared too much, but she wanted to remind him that Roman rule was not as perfect as some citizens might claim.

Maximian laughed shortly. "Our precious Emperor Nero is far too interested in clowning on the stages of Greece to pay any attention to the running of the empire."

At the river bridge they passed under the arch, where Gallic tribes called the Parisii used to collect exorbitant tolls from all who journeyed north to Britain or south to the Mediterranean and Rome. The Romans had done away with tolls and the passage was free nowadays, though so crowded with merchants, countrymen, citizens, travelers, and the garrison from the Palace of Justice on the island that Lysandra thought a tollkeeper might have cut down the congestion.

"I suggest you have your carriage stopped by the side door on the dock here," Maximian suggested when they had made their way across the bridge and under the great palace walls. "You can reach your apartment much quicker and have your things around you. The place is like an icy labyrinth most of the year."

Genuinely grateful, she held out her hand. "You have been very kind, commander, making my arrival so much easier."

He took her hand in his and closed his fingers around her wrist. She enjoyed the warmth and easy strength in those fingers and was sorry when he released her.

"On the contrary, Lysandra. I owe you a great deal. Possibly even the lives of my men. It was goodhearted of you to intervene. I won't forget it."

Long after he rode on, apparently to stable his horse, she thought about his smile. It brought her the only pleasure she felt as she followed his advice. She entered the forbidding Palace of Justice by the little side door, climbing a flight of dark, winding steps to the second floor of the building, which seemed more prison than palace.

In the room set aside for Lysandra, Perseus, her father, waited, comfortably reading the scroll of a play soon to be presented in the local amphitheater. He arose from the chair without hurry. Although he had put on a little weight from his sedentary job, he still managed to exude a courtliness that made each woman think she was the only object of his thoughts. Lysandra could see that he retained his florid good

looks. His black hair was touched up with kohl or some dye, but it appeared natural, thanks to his dark eyes and complexion. Nobody but his daughter was likely to notice the petulance of his mouth or his self-indulgent expression.

"My dear child, how you've grown!" he told her, embracing her heartily. He added, "You are so improved I would never have known you. . . . And here is little Daphne." He chuckled the girl under the chin. Lysandra tried to be amused at how quickly her father sized up a female conquest; nor was Daphne averse to the idea. She preened herself under his attention. But secretly, Lysandra found that his preoccupation with the quantity rather than the quality of love was humiliating. She couldn't help comparing her father with General Maximian, who had been polite and kind to her, yet managed to retain a certain masculine reserve that she found intriguing.

When Daphne left the father and daughter alone and reluctantly went to supervise the unpacking of Lysandra's journey chest, Lysandra asked her father the question that had baffled her since his summons.

"Why did you want me to come, Father? How can I help you?" She knew he would never have sent for her if he hadn't needed her in some way.

He moved to the embrasure set in the heavy outer wall of the palace. His long Greek himation reached his ankles, and he was careful to move with stately grace. After inhaling the deceptive, springlike air of the morning, he announced, "I am in love at last. There it is. The truth."

She sighed. It was impossible to hide her impatience. "Oh, Father. Not that again."

He waved aside her objection. "No. You don't understand. This is the first important woman since your mother died. She put me in the way of making my fortune. You saw what I sent you. Our first deal. It went without any difficulty. Soon, through other deals, there will be enough to keep me and the Lady Ancaris for the rest of our lives."

"What?"

He spoke softly but couldn't conceal his excitement. "It is a secret, you see. But even if anything becomes known, we can escape to the Channel, then hire a galley to Egypt or Syria and go overland, perhaps to Parthia. Think of it, daughter. To live with the most beautiful woman in the world. And one day her father is sure to forgive her and let her divorce Maximian. Vespasian indulges her every whim, she says. . . .

But my dear, don't look at me like that. You will share our good fortune, of course. You and whoever you may marry."

She could only stare at him, wondering if he had gone mad. After his calm silence, which further terrified her, he clearly was expecting her congratulations. She managed to ask, "The Lady Ancaris?"

"At the moment she is General Maximian's wife. But there will be a divorce, of course. He is quite unworthy of her."

"Dear gods on Olympus!" She was terrified. This was worse than anything she could have imagined.

Chapter Two

After the shock of her father's announcement, Sandra's first thought was to keep him quiet. Judging by his past affairs, he would be over this idiocy in a month or so and anxious to rid himself of any ties with the luckless female. But he had never before done anything as mad as seducing the wife of the highest official in Northern Gaul.

He urged her, "Well? Didn't think your old father could achieve so much, did you?"

"No, I didn't. Father, have you thought of the incredible danger? This woman's husband is a powerful Roman."

"That is why it must be kept secret. But she is higher-placed than he. In fact, she tells me he owes his army post to her father." He was trying to soothe Lysandra, but she was not a mistress, only a daughter, and his hands caressing her arms had no effect beyond reminding her that it was by such soft, ingratiating ways that he had gotten himself into his present trouble. She removed his hands with a firmness that hurt his feelings.

"Father, stop and think."

He held his head up proudly. "I have thought, my dear. But we talked this over all of three weeks ago. She has been a veritable goddess. It was her idea. About the future, I mean. She is so attached to me she even spends hours with me when no one knows. Of course, now we must be cautious, but for many nights she has actually helped me in my work." Lysandra opened her mouth, but he silenced her with the assurance, "All in secret. We take great care in public. No one would guess by our manner to each other. But she has even balanced the payroll accounts for the troops in Lutetia. Naturally, I recopy the reports. Wouldn't be wise to submit them in any other hand. But the point is, it shows you how strong her affection for me has become."

She let him watch her anxiously for a few minutes. She had never been so frightened. Maybe the woman was in love

with her father. But the two of them couldn't run far enough to escape the influence of Rome. Another matter troubled her almost as much.

"Well, then, Father, this money that will support you like Persian satraps, is it her inheritance?"

He hesitated. He wasn't telling her everything, and this in itself warned her of greater dangers. She knew how much her father valued the rich life. He dismissed the matter offhandedly.

"As you say, an inheritance. From her mother."

"Everyone knows the Lady Ancaris' mother was a freed-woman, General Vespasian's mistress. She had no inheritance, Father."

He flushed and bit his lip. His enthusiasm to confide in her, and boast a little, was fading, and she knew he lied when he explained, "To tell the truth, I suspect her so-called fortune came from payments of grateful . . . friends." He saw her face and added quickly, "Grateful for her intercession with her father. They paid for her influence with old Vespasian. Something of that sort. It doesn't matter. Eventually, our deals will give us a fortune, if managed properly. Already, two deals have been a success. You had the money from the first—ah—investment, a simple matter of bookkeeping, commonplace in any station. And we succeeded in the second one more than a month ago."

"How?"

He backtracked. "I happen to know we made eighteen thousand sesterces in our most recent . . . investment."

"Investment in what?"

He glanced at the window and said quickly, "Cargoes. Barges. Transport."

She looked around the room, whose stone walls had been made warmly livable with velvet and heavy draperies. The furnishings were not as austere as those in rich Roman houses, but far more comfortable in this cool, damp climate: a couch, larger than the Roman style, with a fur coverlet; two chairs, also cushioned with fur; a low tabaret; a big ornate chest of shining black wood; several swinging lamps.

Her father's "General Max" had been particularly kind to her. He didn't deserve this treatment from her father. She asked him suddenly, "Why are you doing this to your patron? How has he hurt you?"

But to her surprise Perseus did have a grudge against General Max.

"He treats me like one of his scribes. A slave, mind you. No dignity whatever. Puts me at the last couch when I am present at a large dinner. He hasn't raised anyone's pay in over a year. Claims the army hasn't raised anyone's pay, including his. But I'm not one of his borrowed legionaries."

The door opened. Perseus raised his hand to silence her. Lysandra agreed heartily. Of all people, it would be disastrous for Daphne, a born gossip, to know anything about Perseus' affair with the governor's wife. He made a fuss over the slave girl.

"Ah! Here's our pretty Daphne, come back to make an old man happy just by looking at her."

Daphne giggled and preened herself under his attentions, pronouncing him far too young to be calling himself an old man. As for Lysandra, she was still shaken by his revelation and almost afraid to let him out of her sight. At the moment she couldn't think of any way out of this disaster except, perhaps, to discourage the lady herself. And that was a road filled with perils as well.

For the rest of the day Lysandra and Daphne explored the boat-shaped island in the river, wandering along the stone quai and the reed-crust ed borders that were covered by high waters in the late-winter runoffs. Daphne chattered the entire time. Amazing how many good-looking men the girl could point out in a single walk! Lysandra had no sooner made this observation than she scolded herself. Here Daphne was admiring different men, while Lysandra's own thoughts were not entirely of her father, but more often than she liked to admit of General Maximian.

In view of the danger to her own family, she had no business sympathizing with the governor of Lutetia. But she couldn't help feeling that he had been treated very badly by his own wife and by Perseus. She felt as guilty as if she herself had betrayed the handsome commander. She was more aware every minute of his kindness to her.

She and Daphne passed the east end of the Palace of Justice and were about to examine the exterior of the little stone temple to the god Mercury, idol of the Bargemen's Guild, when they heard running footsteps over the unpaved ground behind them. One of the courageous Roman legionaries whose lives Lysandra had saved that day came loping after

the two girls. His left knee was bandaged, and Lysandra, remembering the deep slash he had received, marveled that he could move so easily only a couple of hours later, with the short Roman bow hung over his arm and the quiver of arrows at his back. She had to admit—her Gallic ancestors' ideas to the contrary—that these Romans were tough.

"I'm Enobarbus, the bow-bearer," the soldier announced, saluting Lysandra, his fist ringing against his breast armor. "Sent to escort the Lady Lysandra. What would you like to see, my lady? Name the wonders of the town."

"I am interested in everything. You are very kind, centurion."

"Lady, I owe you my life. No getting away from it. Besides, General Max would have my hide if anything happened to you."

Enobarbus ushered the two girls up the steps into the severe Doric interior of the single-story temple. There were a surprising number of worshipers at the shrine of Mercury, the winged god of money, profits, travel, and tricksters. Seeing Lysandra's expression, Enobarbus said bluntly, "Didn't know the Roman trickster god was the idol of these heathen Gauls, did you?" Not understanding her indignation, he plowed on. "He's their favorite god. There's a big temple up on the Hill of Mars, north of the city, above that marshy right bank there. They've took to it like Mercury was a druid, or something."

"But surely some of those worshipers are Roman." She waved toward the shadowy faces beyond the incense and torches. Straight, unadorned Doric pillars cast bars of greater darkness across the floor. Like a prison, Lysandra thought, and was chilled by a premonition of evil. Maybe it was the god himself who depressed her. She had occasionally attended temple services of the great Jupiter, Minerva-of-the-Gray Eyes, and Juno, the queen goddess. But she despised Mercury. And here was a temple full of her own people, offering gifts, money, and time to the trickster. It must be this realization that depressed her. "Let's get out," she said quickly, and started back to the impressive iron-studded doors before Daphne and Enobarbus knew what she was doing.

From somewhere behind the Doric columns that led to the modest-sized statue of the fleet-footed god, she heard a woman's voice call to the soldier.

"Enobarbus, come here. I need you."

In spite of the musical quality in that voice, it was a clear

command, and Lysandra observed a disgusted expression on the soldier's face before he turned back to the distant altar.

"Sorry, my lady. Only carrying out governor's orders," he called to the unseen woman.

"Enobarbus?" Again the musical voice with the hidden barb. "Come here."

He shrugged at Lysandra, and his boots grated over the stone floor as he strode back to the imperious woman in the shadow of the Doric pillars. Lysandra had taken several steps out to the narrow portico, which was bathed in chill sunlight, when Daphne looked around and caught her breath. The girl was so obviously impressed that Lysandra's own curiosity got the better of her and she stepped back into the temple to see this paragon who awed pretty Daphne and gave orders to a tough legionary.

The woman was very slender, her figure almost boyish in a Roman stolla and matching palla that glittered with gold threads interspersed in the natural woolen weave. Lysandra would always thereafter think of the Lady Ancaris, wife to General Maximian, as a fragile golden pillar, from the crown of her spun-gold hair to her gold-painted toenails. There was a deceptively somnolent quality about her narrow eyes, but again, like the rest of her, they glittered. Dainty and elegant, she revealed no human passions to the casual observer. Lysandra could only suppose Perseus had been captivated by her exterior rather than any warmth within.

Enobarbus muttered, "Lady Ancaris."

"Who is this?" the governor's wife asked Enobarbus, indicating the dark Lysandra.

Lysandra spoke for herself. "I am the daughter of Perseus, General Maximian's private secretary, my lady."

Lysandra didn't know quite what she expected, either an elaborate pretense of not knowing her, or a friendly interest in her lover's daughter. What she didn't expect was the Lady Ancaris' cool study of her and the remark without inflection, "One of the Greek scribes, I suppose. . . . Enobarbus, will you please take up my packages? My maid keeps dropping them." She had obviously come to the temple direct from a shopping expedition on the left bank. A harried-looking older woman trailed along behind her, loaded down with folds of material and small jewel packets.

Caught between his duties to Lysandra and the Lady Ancaris, the soldier hesitated. For her father's sake, Lysandra

said at once, "Please go with the Lady Ancaris. We won't need you. Thank you."

Much relieved, Enobarbus saluted her before taking the awkward mountain of purchases from the maid. Ancaris inclined her head to Lysandra, smiled graciously, and left the temple.

Daphne gasped and whispered, "She's so beautiful!"

She was indeed, but Lysandra's own uneasiness about her was echoed in Daphne's further remark: "She scares me."

By this time Lysandra had lost interest in exploring Lute-tia. She kept wondering why a woman in Ancaris' position, the rich wife of a high official, should give up everything, even her own fortune, to run away with a Greek secretary who wasn't even a citizen and had few more advantages than a common slave.

There was something not quite right here. The Lady Ancaris certainly didn't act like a woman madly in love with anyone but herself.

But things looked much better when Lysandra and Daphne returned to their apartment in the Palace of Justice. Another of General Maximian's secretaries had left Lysandra an invitation to join the governor's banquet that evening for the municipal council of Lutetia. Perhaps the Lady Ancaris had arranged it as a means of seeing Perseus.

Daphne, however, had a different explanation.

"I knew it, my lady. That good-looking General Max wants to eat dinner with you. Isn't it exciting? He's taken a fancy to you."

"You forget, Daphne, he is married."

Daphne winked. "I don't see what that has to do with anything."

Lysandra smiled, but whatever the reason for the invitation, remembering her father and the general's wife, she felt as guilty as if she herself had betrayed General Max.

Chapter Three

Shortly before the sunset dinner hour, Lysandra began to worry about more immediate matters than her father's disastrous love affair. It was Daphne who planted the seeds while dressing Lysandra after her bath.

"I do envy you, Lady Sandra. I'd be so frightened, but I'd love it, attending a banquet with all those great gentlemen of the town council, and you lying there beside them. So daring, these Romans!"

Lysandra had been busy admiring her new blue gown made of silk from far Ceres in the Orient as Daphne fastened her into it, crossing the silver cords over and under her breasts, but now she began to have doubts. "I'll be sitting at one of those little Roman tables . . . won't I?"

"I don't think so, mistress. They say you lie with both ladies and gentlemen." Daphne flashed her dimples, pulling so hard on the cords outlining Lysandra's breasts that Lysandra winced. When she could catch her breath, she suggested, "Well then, I don't want to look like a fashionable wanton. Loosen the cords, please."

"But you have such nice breasts and hips, my lady. And General Max's wife is as flat as a board. Oh, all right!"

Very much more nervous than she wished to be, Lysandra examined her reflection in the silver mirror Daphne held up. After one sight of the fascinating Ancaris, slim as a reed, with practically no curves, she felt overdressed and overweight. In spite of Daphne's efforts, Lysandra was anxious to look elegant, not sexually alluring. Now, to her critical view, she looked neither one way nor the other.

"And these silver bracelets," Daphne urged her. "Then the necklace."

Lysandra protested, "Too much."

In the end she wore one silver bracelet and the thinnest silver strands around her neck, avoiding anything that attracted attention to the cleavage between her breasts. Such matters

never came up at home, where there was almost no occasion to exhibit her sexuality.

Perseus had been busy on the army accounts all afternoon and came to get her at the last minute. She had no chance to discuss her meeting with the Lady Ancaris while he escorted her down to the banquet hall. He was impressed by her appearance and praised her for her good taste, which reconciled Lysandra to her appearance in spite of worldly-wise Daphne's whisper: "By Venus, my lady, good taste is for old ladies. Wait till General Max sees you."

Lysandra laughed but would not have been human if she hadn't wondered what the general would think when he saw her. Meanwhile, she had a chance to develop a "dignified entrance" like that of a player in an amphitheater, while she and her father descended the wide marble staircase to the enormous ground-floor hall two stories high. She tried hard not to look at the impassive soldiers at the top and bottom of the great staircase.

Just as she stepped down between the brown marble pillars of the main hall, her sandal slipped on the newly scrubbed mosaics of the floor and a Roman, crossing the hall from the Judgment Chamber, gave her his hand.

Embarrassed, she murmured a brisk thank you without looking at him, but was startled when she heard General Maximian's rueful laugh and his confession, "It happened to me yesterday. Must they be so infernally clean?"

He had put her at her ease and she reminded him lightly, "Isn't excessive cleanliness a Roman trait, excellency?"

Perseus, on Lysandra's other side, chided her, "Be more respectful, my child. You are speaking to the governor."

General Maximian good-humoredly waved aside protocol. "We are old friends, your daughter and I. She may say what she pleases, and I hope she will."

Under her black lashes she studied the governor. He was dressed for dinner in a dark tunic of a material with a thick, soft nap. His bronzed arms and legs were bare, and she admired his flesh that showed no signs of the chill Gallic climate. Evidently he was an outdoor man and not one of the Emperor Nero's decorative Indoor Soldiers. Also, unlike the Roman merchants Lysandra had met at home, he wore no jewelry, except his distinguished Claudian family finger ring and around his neck a medallion from General Vespasian's own legion.

In spite of family loyalty to her father, Lysandra couldn't

understand how any woman could prefer Perseus to General Max. She admitted to herself that her father might have hidden romantic talents, but what could be wrong with Maximian that he didn't love the dazzling Ancaris?

She remarked on the impressive hall with its vaulted roof and was surprised when Maximian dismissed all this Roman glory with the flat statement, "I prefer smaller rooms. You ought to see Nero's new Golden House. He's built it halfway across Rome. And not a plain, comfortable corner in the entire palace." He was looking at Lysandra. She warmed to his smile as he assured her, "The gods be thanked for an extra guest tonight who doesn't belong to the council. I can't thank you enough, Perseus, for providing your daughter. I've had enough of those council wives. Remember the last banquet, Perseus? That councilman with the villa on the slopes of the Hill of Mars?"

Perseus nodded. "I do indeed, commander. The drunker he got, the more talkative his wife became. She ended by telling you precisely how to run Lutetia."

They were nearing two great double doors guarded by a pair of armored legionaries, who were probably present to impress the local council. Lutetia's citizens seldom indulged in the kind of mob violence Lysandra had interrupted that day. But the conversation about wives reminded Lysandra of her encounter in the Mercury Temple.

Without looking at her father, she remarked to the general, "Speaking of wives, I believe I met the Lady Ancaris today."

Although her father looked nervous, the general said briefly, "So Enobarbus tells me. I sent him to escort you. He did wrong to disobey me, and he knows it."

She was puzzled as to how she could answer this and almost stammered, "She—she is very beautiful."

"And how well she knows it! Here we are." The two legionaries pushed open the doors. Lysandra moved into a long Roman triclinium, its heavy stone walls warmed by bright paintings, still lifes and scenes of Italian summer resorts. There were more couches than she had ever seen before in one dining room, each series of three placed in a semicircle around a small citrus-wood table with an exquisite inlaid surface.

Some of the guests had already arrived, apparently having been greeted by General Max's subordinates. He waved Lysandra to one of the influential members of the Lutetian

council, a stout, Romanized Gaul who welcomed this shapely addition to his couch.

In presenting Lysandra to the councilman, General Max did not mention her father, and it was only later that she noticed that Perseus took third place on a couch at the far end of the room. She objected to this caste system and immediately upon discovering it tried to point out her identity to the councilman, but he cut into her explanation without listening. He moved closer to her on the couch they shared with an effete young Egyptian who wore kohl on his eyes and a red salve on his cheeks. The Egyptian proved the less obnoxious of the two, describing for her a typical Alexandrian feast.

"No peacocks' tongues here in this pesthole, of course. My great-grandfather was present at the feast Cleopatra gave for Antony at Tarsus. Now, *there* was a feast."

"It cost him the Roman Empire," Lysandra reminded him, and he found her more interesting.

"So you know history. Unusual in a female."

The councilman reached over and pinched the tip of her breast. "When they look like this pretty partridge they don't need to know history. Do they, my love?"

Repulsed by his fat fingers, she shrank away from him toward the relative safety of the young Egyptian. The councilman took another long draft of golden wine, then offered the lip of the silver goblet to Lysandra. "Here, lovely Sandra—that fine body of yours won't be so tight after a swig of Falernian."

She pushed it away, trying to smile at the same time, and was relieved when a new arrival into the noisy room distracted the councilman's attention. Apparently, General Maximian had left to get his wife. He ushered her in, and all conversation ceased. Lady Ancaris was molded into cloth of gold from head to foot. She was a lovely sight, with her gracious smile, her slumberous eyes, and the blinding light she brought to the room. She didn't once look at Perseus, though Lysandra could see him staring hungrily at the golden beauty.

On the other hand, Ancaris' husband, having escorted her to the place of honor at the first couch, had lost all interest in her and was holding a conversation with the centurion Enobarbus. Lysandra wondered what that was all about. The centurion was not a dinner guest. He seemed to have brought some kind of message, and General Maximian was looking serious as he glanced at the group of couches spread through-

out the long room. Lysandra's heart skipped a beat. Was he looking at her father? . . . Please, she prayed to any goddess who might be listening, don't let him find out about my father. Not yet. Give me time to have him make amends. . . .

She didn't know precisely what Perseus and the commander's wife had been up to besides a secret love affair, but she was mortally afraid of his boast about the eighteen thousand sesterces that they had made already by some underhanded method.

The councilman tried to feed her a slice of a coarse-grained meat that he called "boar's head," but she pretended to be busy with the salmon, which had been carried to Lutetia from a German river, carefully packed in ice. Each time he tried to take her hand, she managed to get her fingers oily as she reached for an olive or a slice of duck egg. She was watching the general and his centurion. Their voices rose suddenly.

"I might have had more notice," Maximian objected. "It's halfway around the world. There will be nothing but the grain ships crossing the sea. Meanwhile, there are the accounts to settle here, the army and the rest to turn over to a new commander. Who is it to be?"

"General Vitellius, I heard, sir. Temporarily, they'll unite Lutetia with his Rhine command. His second-in-command is on his way across Northern Gaul now to meet with you and take over."

Maximian raised his hand and ran his fingers through his hair as he considered. He wore his dark-brown hair short in the Roman fashion, but it was inclined to curl, and Lysandra, watching him, found its unruliness endearing. She was sorry to hear his command had been changed, but Maximian himself seemed to reconsider his first objection.

"Still, it's an honor that Vespasian asks for me personally. And he shouldn't be stuck away in Greece longer than it takes him to hear the emperor's military advice. Such as it is."

"Yes, sir. I'd say, judging by what I've seen, sir, he counts on you as he does on his son Titus. And a lot more than he counts on young Domitian."

"Quiet! No talk like that when we are in Syria and Judea. Domitian is a jealous young man. He can make trouble for us all."

Like Lysandra, Lady Ancaris had overheard her husband.

She called to Maximian from her place between the municipal council's new presiding officer and his subordinate.

"What are you saying about my brother Domitian, dearest?"

General Max and the centurion exchanged glances. To the interest of the other banqueters, the general said casually, "Your father has asked me to take over his command in Syria. There have been new raids by the Parthians. And the Judean King Agrippa is calling in your brother Titus and his command. Another rebellion. Agrippa can't seem to rule his own subjects."

Ancaris slipped gracefully off the couch and moved to join her husband. "What about me? Or am I needed in the Judean deserts too?"

"You, my dear, will return to our house in Pompeii. Unless you prefer Nero's court."

"Brother Domitian says Rome is tired of pandering to Nero's wretched tastes. Maybe the Senate will remove that tiresome young man."

"I don't advise you to talk like that in Rome," her husband warned her, lowering his voice a little late, for the entire room had heard her. "Or have you forgotten what happened to Senator Piso and his conspirators? By the way, you might tell Domitian he talks too much."

"My little brother can be discreet. Don't worry. Especially since Father has always favored Titus over Domitian and me. We know by this time that when we want something, we must be very cautious. Very subtle. And we can wait. There is all the time in the world."

She smiled, ran a finger over her husband's cheek. Lysandra found it intriguing that he seemed unaffected by her touch. Obviously his marriage to the daughter of his mentor and commander was a political matter, and no more. Still, he must be made of iron to resist so seductive an enchantress.

After that, the centurion left the triclinium and Maximian returned to the couch he shared with a prominent local merchant and a councilman's wife.

Conversation became general throughout the room, but Lysandra was certain that everyone's thoughts had been centered upon the knowledge that a popular governor like Maximian Claudius was about to be replaced by General Vitellius, whose methods of handling of the fierce Rhine and German tribes would not work at all in a civilized country like Northern Gaul.

Before the banquet ended, Maximian was gone. Lysandra did not see him go, but she supposed he must have a great deal to do involving the changeover from his governorship to that of General Vitellius, a man known throughout Germany and Gaul as a drunken gourmand whose appetite had earned him the nickname of the Pig.

This might give Lysandra time to talk her father out of his mad affair with Maximian's wife, since he could hardly return to Pompeii with her.

But the idea of never seeing General Maximian again was less and less appealing.

What would it have been like to marry Lucius Maximian Claudius, with his warmth and strength and the kindness he had shown her? He was too good to deserve betrayal by her father and the Lady Ancaris.

When Ancaris started out of the triclinium with the council chief and his wife, Lysandra watched the woman pass Perseus, whose gaze never left her. But Ancaris took care not to look his way. Evidently she regarded very seriously the agreement between herself and Perseus, that they should reveal no personal feeling in public. Lysandra didn't know whether to be glad or sorry. She hoped the attitude was due to caution and nothing else.

She waited anxiously to speak to her father while fending off the councilman. He circled her waist and drew her to him. She didn't want to create a scene, so she reminded him laughingly, "Take care. Your wife is watching us."

He had drunk too much of the imported Falernian but was still observant enough to press his wet mouth against the back of her neck and assure her, "Can't be. She's too busy sharing her favors with General Max's second in command."

Unable to stand his disgusting mouth or his prowling hands any longer, Lysandra broke away from him, pretending to tease him. "Another time. I must see my father."

She hurriedly tried to release herself, ignoring his desperate clutch at her gown, and heard a tearing noise as her skirt seam began to rip at the waist. Her best dinner gown. Furious, she swung around and slapped his perspiring face. Although there had been loud activity around them, for some reason her slap attracted the attention of a dozen people. There was a minute of awful stillness, then a half-smothered laugh and a buzz of gossip.

Before Lysandra, who was breathing fast, could say a

word, her father was at her side and urging her in a panicked whisper, "A mistake. Tell him—a mistake."

The councilman wavered, clutching his cheek, unsure whether to laugh or be insulted.

Lysandra shared his humiliation, and prodded by her father, she managed a breathless display of regret. "I'm so sorry! I'm afraid I turned so suddenly, I—I—"

Having saved face a little late in the day, the councilman accepted her apologies graciously. "Perfectly understandable, little partridge."

She forced herself to give him her most ingratiating smile. He was still vaguely accepting her apology when Perseus left the triclinium with her. Never again, she promised herself. No more Roman banquets. . . .

But she soon became aware of greater problems than the pawing hands of a drunk. She couldn't mistake her father's tension. She felt it through his body, the stiffness of his arm under hers. The minute they reached the gloomy upper hall of the palace she asked, "Will there be difficulty between you and General Maximian before he turns Lutetia over to the other general?"

"Certainly not. Why should there be? My dear, you worry too much."

"But he said Lady Ancaris would return to their home in Pompeii."

His hand slipped off her arm. After an uncomfortable moment he said sternly, "You have very little faith in my word. I assure you, she has given me her solemn promise. You don't suppose I would have cooperated with her otherwise. Naturally, she wants General Maximian to believe she is returning to their home."

It was all so dishonorable. She wanted to remind him of this but had to frame the accusation carefully. There was a traditional respect due her father, no matter what he had done.

"Father, Romans often divorce each other. Wouldn't it be more honest for the Lady Ancaris to tell her husband straight out that she wished a divorce?"

For some reason, this agitated him far more than it should have. "You are too young to understand. The divorce is the least of it. Ancaris needs money to support herself. She is a general's daughter, after all."

Why didn't she ask General Vespasian for money to support her then? But Lysandra could see that this question

would get her nowhere. Whatever her father's protests of complete confidence in Ancaris, she knew he was terrified of something, and there seemed no way to help him.

They reached the door of her apartment, which the household slaves had made bright with lamps and reasonably comfortable with several coal braziers that glowed red, beckoning her to forget her father's troubles. Daphne was gone, and Lysandra suspected the girl had set up a flirtation with one of the Gallic servants. Seeing that she and her father were still alone, Lysandra made one last plea.

"Tell me what the problem is, Father. Maybe I can help you in some way."

For an instant he stared at her, his dark eyes wide, as if he found hope in her face. Then he shook his head and kissed her gently on the cheek.

"I know you would help me, if you could. But there is no problem, child. Sleep well." And he strode off down the hall, his head up and his back straight. She let herself be convinced by these signs that all was well, and went into her room, holding her hands out to the glowing coals of the brazier.

By the time Daphne came fluttering in, explaining speciously that she had gone out to escort Lysandra back to her room and lost her way, Lysandra herself was almost reconciled to the idea that she had misread her father's mood. It was Ancaris, after all, whose motives she mistrusted. Surely if the woman was so taken with Perseus that she would sacrifice everything to run away with him, she would give some slight indication of it when they were within arm's length of each other. But she had behaved as if she scarcely knew her husband's private secretary and accountant.

Chapter Four

Although the climate in Northern Gaul was very different from that of the warm, semitropical Mediterranean where she lived, Lysandra slept comfortably and awoke with a sense of pleasure and expectation, remembering her kind treatment by the governor of Lutetia. But while she dressed in verdant green wool and Daphne wrapped her in a cloak more enveloping than a Roman palla, the maid's chatter brought back all last night's worries.

"It must be dreadful to have a post like your father's, my lady. When I went to get your wash water he was in one of those little library rooms working so hard on his wax tablets!"

It was not like Perseus to be up before dawn. He was a good man with accounts, but Lysandra had always supposed his social life kept him from overwork. He was efficient without carrying it to extremes, and certainly his nights were his own.

Since most Romans ate very little until midday lunch, Lysandra appreciated the bread and honey left by one of the palace servants, which she ate before she went to find her father. For some reason he had taken an armful of tablets, a sharpened stylus, and several scrolls and had gone off to another tablinum. No one seemed sure where he was.

It was easy to lose herself in this labyrinth, and Lysandra soon found, in searching for her father, that many of these public hearing rooms like miniature basilicas opened into each other rather than onto one of the high-roofed main halls, and a tablinum was much too small for her to find without directions.

When she pushed a small wooden door open, she found herself in the gallery of the main Judgment Chamber. She looked down on an impressive scene with marble pillars outlining the long, rectangular room and a roof shrouded in perpetual shadows. She was awed by its spacious elegance, at the same time reflecting that the high, narrow embrasures set in

thick walls did not give nearly enough light or heat. The unseasonal February sunlight was still beaming on Lutetia this morning, but it brought little warmth to the interior of the Judgment Chamber.

Even Governor Maximian, seated in the hall's only chair, with a long ebony-and-gold table before him, was wrapped in a voluminous cloak of plain, weather-resistant brown wool with an imported cotton lining revealed as he crossed his legs. He was listening to the report of a decurion whose men had evidently gotten into difficulties with the Bargemen's Guild.

The chief of the guild stood to one side, wearing a fur-trimmed tunic that showed his knotty, muscular legs and a short lynx cape with the hood thrown back. His hair was a Teutonic yellow, worn in a wisp of a braid down his back. Probably the product of some union between invaders from across the Rhine and the local Gauls, Lysandra thought, and understood why Maximian had mentioned the Bargemen's Guild as so troublesome. All life in the little river city of Lutetia could be brought to a halt when the bargemen went on strike.

The decurion insisted, "This here fellow says the guild already paid for the right to haul and sell merchandise for the guild's benevolent fund. They been doing it for weeks, he says, without paying the import tax here at the Lutetia wharves."

"The benevolent fund. One of your newer charities?" Maximian asked on a note of irony.

The big fur-clad shoulders shrugged. The bargeman knew his power and stuck to his story.

"Since the last Saturnalia. Two months and more, excellence. The deal was made one evening in a house behind the Temple of Mercury. All signed, sealed, and swore to."

Lysandra leaned over the gallery rail and watched the governor. She remembered the way his eyebrow went up as he smiled. She realized now that the expression could also be less than friendly.

"A quite secret deal, in fact. I wonder why."

Not to be put down by such hints, the bargeman insisted boldly, "We figured you wouldn't like it to get around, excellence. Kind of like taking graft, and all."

Maximian uncrossed his legs and leaned forward.

"Are you going to tell me you saw me there in that so-called house, you rogue?"

"Excuse me, general, but that would be pretty silly. We

didn't expect you'd come yourself, and when you sent a scribe, well—we figured it was the natural thing to do.”

“He's lying every which way,” the decurion insisted. “You wharf rat! Our General Max don't take bribes. If he did, he'd damn well divide with his men, our general would.”

Lysandra stifled a laugh, but the sound caught Maximian's attention and he glanced up, frowning.

“Who are you up there? Come out of the shadows. Let us see you.”

Nervously, she called down to the three staring men, “I beg your pardon. I wandered into the gallery by mistake.”

The torchère beside the big table had flared up as the men shifted their attention to her, and she was relieved when the general's expression softened. “Oh, it's you. Well, run along now. This isn't a business for pretty ears.”

She backed away and then turned and went out through the little door into the upper hall, marveling at the many and varied problems of a military man who had been given temporary command of a Roman province. No one had ever told her that more time was spent on the subject of bribes than on the invasion of Germanic hordes or the conquest of foggy, misty Britain.

After returning to her room and starting out again, she found her father's hideaway in a little tablinum off the cold, twisting steps by which she had first entered the Palace of Justice on the little island. She couldn't mistake his alarm as he looked furtively over his shoulder. Seeing her, he relaxed, but there was still tension in his hunched shoulders and the smile he forced when he greeted her.

“Did you sleep well, my dear? You are looking very pretty this morning.” He stood up and kissed her. On an impulse she hugged him and was rewarded by his own embrace and the curious pathos of his whispered, “Thank you, dear child.”

“What were you doing here? Going through your old files?”

“Yes. I wanted to find something I—that is—something that was signed officially. But it's gone. And now they will be able to tell that the general didn't sign it. He knows exactly how his family seal is used.”

He had been handling dozens of bits of papyrus, thin cylinders with red index flaps, and a number of flat pieces that seemed to be full of complicated Roman numerals, probably accounts. He had discarded them all.

She put her hands on his shoulders, looked up into his

troubled eyes, and pleaded, "Father, I am a woman grown now. Most girls of seventeen have already been married three years. You know that, don't you?"

He nodded, moistened his lips. "But we will marry you to a thoroughly respectable young man here in Lutetia. I have one or two ideas." He squeezed her hands. "It is absolutely essential that you belong to the family or a Roman citizen. Not to me as you do now, legally. You understand?"

She didn't understand, but knew he was deadly serious about it. "You said last year just before Saturnalia that you were becoming a Roman citizen. If you do become a citizen, then I will be one. Isn't that much better than running away to some foreign power like Parthia, at the ends of the earth?"

His hands dropped away from hers. "We have gone so far. It may be too late for me. I don't know. But you must not be dragged down with us. That is why I have decided that the sooner you become the property of your husband, the safer you will be."

It was all very mysterious, and more frightening than ever. But surely, since the Lady Ancaris was also involved in her father's problem, he could escape part of the blame for what had been done. Since he and Ancaris planned to run away together if they were found out, they would do well to leave secretly and at once, if they had committed a crime serious enough to destroy Perseus.

"Father, how bad is it? And what have I to do with it?"

He sighed, threw back two more scrolls. "The Lady Ancaris came to me with a plan some months ago. She had let me make . . ." He avoided her eyes. "She and I made love. Several times. Then she started to talk about the general's mistreatment of her. Showed me bruises on her—her thigh. And her forearm. Said he was a brute, that we must make a profit while we could and get away from him until her father could make peace for us."

"Oh, Father!"

"It may have been true," he insisted. "That was when she had this idea. She was joking, pretending to help me balance the army payroll bills. We made a real profit on reporting payments for Rhine legionaries detached to serve in Gaul. It is done every day. No one ever discovers it. Then she told me one of the guilds wanted to make a deal. They wished to run some cargoes without paying the toll." She felt a thrill of terror, but he was too busy lamenting to notice. "Supposedly, it was for their charity. They would unload on some of those

little islands in the river behind the Temple of Mercury. No one need know anything about it."

"They do now."

He stared at her. "The Romans know?"

"I heard General Maximian questioning the chief of the Bargemen's Guild."

"Gods in Tartarus!" He caught his breath and rubbed the back of his neck, and dropping the rest of the scrolls, he started across the room. "Ancaris must be warned."

Vaguely, she knew what he and the general's wife had done. Taken bribes in the name of the governor. Surely an offense punishable by death, perhaps by torture as well. She got between him and the door.

"Someone else can do that. You must be prepared at short notice to leave. But it is possible the rest of the story won't come out unless the general interviews someone who knows the whole story. Does anyone know?"

"Only Ancaris." He began to recover from his panic. "I had better get a traveling wagon and two horses ready so that we can get away if we must. I'll have them brought to the stables across the right-bank bridge where they can be kept indefinitely."

It was a depressing thought, but she was too afraid of the alternatives to argue the matter.

"I'll try to warn the general's wife. Where will I find her?"

He had moved her aside and was already in the hall but stopped to consider this. "There is a small passage used by her servants and by . . . visitors she doesn't want others to meet. A little passage next to the north gallery. Her rooms are at the end of that passage."

She found herself shaking, and that made her angry. Here they were risking their lives, committing crime upon crime because he had fallen in love with a woman who betrayed her husband in every way. Now they must waste their precious minutes trying to warn this Ancaris.

"Father, I'll do as you wish. But if she is likely to betray you, I think we should get out of Lutetia now. You know how serious your crime is."

"It is done by all personal secretaries." He then added defensively, "And by governors, too."

"And will your governor save you when he finds his wife is involved? They will both sacrifice you instead."

"I don't believe she would betray me. And I can't escape

without at least warning her. Besides, they may never find out who received that bribe."

She said, "Tell me one thing. Since this was the Lady Ancaris' idea, did she meet the chief of the Bargemen's Guild in a house beyond the Mercury Temple and receive their bribe?"

He had the decency to look ashamed. "No. I did that. But I was well disguised, in a deep cowl."

Since he was suffering enough, she didn't say aloud what she was thinking. Was there ever such a fool as he had been?

She took the route he had suggested to Lady Ancaris' apartments, running through the narrow passage, planning what she would say, how she would persuade that arrogant woman of the danger she faced.

She tried not to dwell on the horror of flights and pursuit, the endless nomad journeying ahead of them, if Perseus was found out. There must be some purpose in it, some good that might come to her and Perseus eventually. But she could not see it now.

The walls of the passage looked damp with mold beneath the single crude lamp with a rag floating in oil, and Lysandra was glad to reach the door at last. She knocked, thought better of it, and tried the wooden latch on the door. It opened inward under her pressure. She found herself in a tiny antechamber plainly inhabited by a female servant or slave, who might return at any moment. There were two huge chests, doubtless full of the Lady Ancaris' gowns, a wooden sleeping couch, and a huge metal mirror. No effort had been made to beautify or warm the stone walls, but a good rug from Anatolia was spread over the floor. The room was faintly lighted by a window embrasure high in the outside wall.

Lysandra moved as silently as possible to the door across the little room. She was relieved to hear voices. It would be disastrous if the governor's wife was wandering about the palace. She heard a slave woman say, "It will take a few hours to make the repairs." Then a door closed.

Thanks to the gods, the lady must be alone now. Lysandra opened the door. A sloe-eyed Egyptian woman turned abruptly, staring at her. She seemed not so much frightened as indignant.

"These apartments are private, my lady. I advise you to return by the passage and take the second door on your left."

Lysandra brushed this aside. "I must see the Lady Ancaris. Immediately."

"Impossible."

Lysandra moved toward her with fists clenched.

"It is a matter of life or death. Go and get her. *At once!*"

The woman had obviously been trained to obey a master's orders. She took two steps, stopped, and recollected herself.

"I have told you it is not possible for you to see the Lady Ancaris. Nor for me to see her. She took only her personal body-servants and her escort."

Lysandra felt for the hard edge of the door behind her. Had the woman run away already, and without warning Perseus? She recovered her voice and asked quietly, "Where has she gone? My father had some accounting business with the lady."

"No use now. She left last night with the governor's blessings, after he discovered he is being transferred." The Egyptian shrugged elaborately. She had a remarkably sinuous body. Lysandra wondered what it would be like to be the property of another human being, and to have every part of that body used by others as they chose, even to beatings, rape, and death. It was inconceivable. Horrifying.

"But where has she gone? Perhaps we could send a message to her."

"To the Gallic capital, my lady. She is carrying papers to Lugdunum for her husband. Since she is the daughter of General Vespasian, her husband trusts her with state affairs." She smiled suddenly, a worldly grin. "At least, her husband is forced to trust her. The daughters of great men carry much weight. Especially beautiful daughters."

It was difficult to know what to do. Lysandra very much wanted to panic, but instead she remarked, "I suppose you know she has actually gone to Lugdunum."

"With a troop of ten soldiers? She had better. She could never trust ten gossiping soldiers."

The truth had been evident all along. Lysandra backed away. Her sandals struck the door. She forced a smile. "Thank you. We will wait until the lady returns. It wasn't too important."

"As you like."

Lysandra closed the door, went back into the passage, and began to run. She was breathless when she reached her father's room. Even now, would he realize that the woman he trusted had used him? Ancaris' husband could not afford to

blame the daughter of his patron, General Vespasian. Therefore, the natural culprit was a Greek private secretary who wasn't even a Roman citizen and couldn't demand a full trial with the Lady Ancaris testifying under oath.

She met her father in his room. He looked tired and worn, and she knew he must have been busy running those errands to assure their flight from the city in case the worst happened.

He nodded. "I've had a travel wagon moved. The horses will be in the right-bank stables within the next hour. I came back by the gallery. I thought I might listen to Governor Max's questioning of the guild chief, but there were two legionaries at the door, eating apples and gossiping like fishwives. May their bones be cursed!" He saw her face, and seemed to expect the worst. "She hasn't talked!"

"No. She has run away, with her husband's blessing. He would never believe any guilt of the noble Lady Ancaris. He does not dare. Her father is his patron. She is being received in the capital of Lugdunum, no doubt by the Roman legate of Northern Gaul. Father, if we could only find out what the bargeman tells the governor, we could at least be forewarned."

"I'll try again," he agreed. "Go and stay with Daphne. In case I hear the worst, I'll come and get you and we will leave at once. Not give them time to question us."

And both her world and his would be destroyed, perhaps for all time. . . .

She went with him into the passage, where they separated. He started toward the echoing gallery that surrounded the big Judgment Chamber below. Before she reached her apartments she heard voices in the hall behind her. On tiptoe she returned to the right angle of the passage where the main hall passed the gallery door. Her father was protesting. He didn't seem under arrest. The two legionaries simply walked with him between them. One said in a friendly way, "Nothing to worry about, friend Perseus. Ain't as if you'd committed some crime. But this damned guild chief—you know what lying bastards they are—he says he can recognize the man he paid some bribe or other to."

"But I've done nothing. He might name me out of desperation, hoping to avoid punishment!" her father protested, his voice high-pitched in panic.

"Now, why would he do that? He's got every scribe in the palace to look at. He ain't going to pick you. Sounds to me like that uppity pig Eolus, the Egyptian, might be the guilty one. He's a good hand at padding his expenses."

The other legionary too was a well-wisher. "All you've got to do is let him see you along with the other scribes. They'll just put a cloak on you, with the hood forward, and all you scribes will march past this barge bastard. He's sure to pick the right one, and you'll be back here safe and sound."

Lysandra swung around, wondering if she could possibly desert her father now. But if she ran, and they learned about it, they would use it as one more piece of evidence against him. She did not dare to run, if she wanted to save his life.

Chapter Five

Daphne brought a tray of food to Lysandra just after sunset. It was two days since Perseus had been identified in the line of cloaked and cowed scribes as the man who took the payment of eighteen thousand sesterces. During these days Lysandra had been kept to her apartments, but otherwise not mistreated. She knew nothing of her father's condition except that he was still alive.

Daphne bubbled with excitement.

"The governor was so kind. I finally got to see him. He wanted to know if you'd eaten your midday meal, and he was positively cross with me when I told him you hadn't eaten."

"Did you tell the governor I wanted to see him?"

"Oh, yes! But you should see the people around him. And just as I was leaving, some soldiers came in and made a great deal of noise rattling swords and saluting."

That caught Lysandra's attention. She turned away from the window embrasure. "What was it?"

"A centurion named Cleon Pollus. He's to take over the governorship for a few weeks because his commander, General Vitellius, doesn't want to leave the Rhine and they may have to send to the Roman headquarters at Lugdunum for a governor." She set down the tray, leaned over it, and whispered loudly, "Oh, Lady Sandra, you'd never guess why this General Vitellius wants to stay on the Rhine with his troops."

"Well, why?" Lysandra couldn't think of anything she cared less about.

"Because there's talk in some legions—on the Rhine and in Hispania, they said—that Emperor Nero is so unpopular he is going to be deposed."

Lysandra pushed the tray aside. "I don't know the emperor. He means nothing to me."

"It's because Emperor Nero is never in Rome anymore. All those silly concerts where he recites. Really! And then, after

he made those senators slit their wrists, he got the Senate angry."

"I thought the Piso conspirators tried to kill him."

"Of course. But punishing them made the other senators angry. Anyway, according to this new governor, Cleon Pollus, the Rhine legions are about to proclaim their General Vitellius as emperor." She giggled. "But that's not the best of it. The legions of Galba and Otho in Hispania are calling General Galba the new emperor. Isn't it too funny?"

"What did they say about my father?"

Daphne's bright eyes clouded at once, as if upon demand. "He is kept locked in a room below the Judgment Chamber. Dear Governor Max says the evidence is certain. But Perseus won't be tortured if he—oh!" She covered her luscious pink mouth.

"Secrets?" Lysandra asked ironically. "He won't be tortured if he confesses, I suppose."

"If he confesses he'll be let to take his own life and not be tortured at all."

"What charity! What compassion!" It was no surprise, and by Roman standards, he deserved death. But it helped Lysandra to vent her anger and terror on Daphne or the Romans or whoever happened to be closest.

Daphne blushed and began to fuss with the tray. "You must eat, my lady. General Max was very firm about that."

"When may I see him?"

Daphne sighed. She had asked General Max's Egyptian scribe several times if her mistress could speak with the governor and had finally spoken with General Max herself, but he could only promise to see her "very soon." Meanwhile, it was known to everyone that he would be leaving Lutetia in a matter of hours, on his long journey to the Near East and Syria.

"Very soon," she repeated, adding the final proof. "He is leaving tonight, because his horse is waiting and his guards. He is only taking two." She pointed to the sausages and chick-peas on the tray. Fruits had been added as well, apples from the fall harvest, dates and figs, and a covered plate with slices of salmon grilled to a turn. "They smell good. Couldn't you eat a little, just to build up strength when you see the general, my lady?"

Lysandra thought it over. She went to the door and looked out. A soldier was standing there about two yards from the door. She might almost squeeze out past him. But no. He

glanced around, grinned and winked at her. To her sudden new awareness, it seemed that he treated her with less respect. She started to close the door. He reached over the outer latch, held it briefly against her pressure.

"I can guard you just as well from the inside, beautiful."

She said the first thing that came into her head.

"I'm afraid General Maximian wouldn't agree to that."

As she had suspected, he backed off and let her go. She slammed the door and returned to the tray. She began to eat standing up, determined to gain strength as Daphne said, for any eventuality.

She finished the salmon, the chick-peas, and some of the dates. It all tasted alike. As straw must taste.

An idea occurred to her. "Daphne, you wear a cloak at night when you take the tray away, don't you?"

Daphne nodded, her big eyes enormous.

"Good. Where was the general when you left him?"

"He was at the Judgment Chamber with that Cleon Pollus. They were going over some tablets with accounts on them. Lutetia pays for extra cohorts from the garrison at Colonia on the Rhine."

"I understand. Have you any idea whether the governor will remain there very long?"

"He had a great many wax tablets piled up. But his stableboy is walking his horse on the wharf outside the Judgment Chamber. He might leave anytime."

Lysandra's laugh was cutting and bitter. "Yet he promised to see me. Very soon."

"Well . . ."

"Now, listen. Put your cloak on with the hood over your head. Go out in the passage with this tray. Then swear—"

"Swear?"

"And say, 'Oh, I forgot the silver plate.' Something like that. Come inside again. I'll throw on your cloak and hood, take the tray, and go out past the guard."

"But if he speaks to you?"

"I'll giggle."

Daphne looked affronted, but did as she was told. Lysandra knew she herself would be every bit as terrified if she hadn't lashed herself into a cold rage.

Daphne carried out instructions almost accurately. She didn't swear when she "forgot" the plate, but she did mention the plate and returned to the room with a nervous giggle. In a quick motion that left the slave girl dizzy, Lysandra swung

the robe off Daphne and over herself, lifted the tray with the silver plate, and hurried out, closing the door with her back to the soldier, who called out, "Off again, sweet one?"

She hunched her shoulders, giggled, and hurried down the hall. Once she reached the right angle where she was hidden from the soldier, she picked up her skirts and ran. No one was guarding the gallery door. She felt her way through the darkness to the marble balustrade, where she leaned over the edge and saw Maximian standing at the big table, throwing down the last wooden-framed wax tablet with a clatter.

There was no time to lose. Lysandra moved as rapidly as she could see her way along the gallery. There must be a staircase somewhere. She found it at last in the southeast corner, tiny and narrow, but it served her purpose. Maximian was halfway to the big double doors when he heard her running footsteps along the length of the Judgment Chamber.

"Who is it? What are you—?" Then he frowned into the half-dark beyond the lamp and his voice changed. "It's Perseus' daughter, isn't it? Good. I wanted to see you. This will save time."

Because she wanted to, she convinced herself there was the warmth and concern she remembered. But he certainly planned to leave soon. He carried his helmet under his arm and was wearing a heavy travel cape. Had it all been a lie in spite of his seeming concern for her? Perhaps he didn't really intend to see her at all.

"I want to explain something to you." He took her hand, drew her to the lamp's fading glow, and seated her in his chair while one of his legs straddled the table's edge. The lamplight touched on his upper thigh, and she caught herself staring at his muscular flesh.

She wet her dry lips and turned her attention to his face. "I was afraid you would leave."

"In less than an hour. In a matter of days I am expected on the other side of the world. But I wanted to explain."

She began in a rush. "He didn't do it, you know. Someone pretended to be my father."

He took a long breath. "About that, it is all over, I'm relieved to say."

She could hardly believe it. "Relieved? Then—oh, is he free?"

He squeezed her hand until the bones ached. She hardly noticed it. He was looking too serious, too sympathetic.

"That was stupid of me. I meant, I have held out for two

days. My subordinates, the Bargemen's Guild, and even the new temporary governor insisted torture should be applied. Tonight . . ." He began again. "Tonight, of his own will, Perseus confessed."

"He couldn't have!"

"He confessed. This made it easier for him."

"How?"

"He was left with a knife and a poniard. He chose to open his wrists rather than to fall upon the poniard. He died gently."

She could only cry, "No! He can't be dead so soon. I wasn't even allowed to see him."

He sympathized with her, but as a soldier, he tried to explain. "The worst part is not what happens to a man who has committed a serious crime. He is punished. But when this man is not a citizen, when he is an alien and commits a crime in the service of Rome, his family—"

The big double doors swung open, pushed by a heavy hand. They both looked around. Maximian swore under his breath. The man who came in wore a centurion's uniform with the marking of the Upper German Legion. So this was the new temporary governor of Lutetia. A short, thickset soldier with a jutting brow and heavy, vein-streaked nose that overshadowed his mouth. A jovial fellow who, like his master, General Vitellius, obviously was a drunkard and a gourmand.

Maximian said abruptly, "I am conducting an interview, centurion. Do you want to meet me in half an hour?"

"No hurry. No hurry. Not if you aren't." The thickset little man kept coming on until he got a good look at Lysandra with the lamp illuminating her glossy black hair.

"By the gods! Small wonder you got rid of the father, if this is the daughter." While Lysandra stared at him open-mouthed at his brazen reference to her, he added, "I'll buy her from you before she goes on sale. What price do you set?"

"She is not for sale," Maximian answered sharply, but this in no way relieved Lysandra, who wondered why he hadn't informed the man that she was no slave.

"Come now." The fellow was persistent. "Her father was condemned. An alien employed in the government. Committing a crime against the civic good. All his family are enslaved. It's the law. You know that."

"The family—if there are any members—become imperial

property. Not mine. Pollus, I'll see you later. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, dear general." Pollus strutted around Lysandra and Maximian, pinched her hip, and only grinned as Maximian shoved his hand away. "If you say you have business, well, I'll not interfere. I'll be with you in half an hour for the final ceremony."

"Good. Meanwhile, Farewell."

There was no mistaking the crisp, sharp order. Pollus retreated, chuckling over what he obviously thought was a liaison between master and slave. When they were alone, Maximian took both her hands, watching her pale, stiff face.

"Please, believe me. It is the law, as that idiot said. But there is a way out. Trust me."

She managed finally, "I know. You've been kind. I remember now that Father tried to warn me of this, but I didn't understand. Nothing could be this horrible. Even Father's death, or my own, would be less a nightmare than this."

"I know. Here is my plan. When your father was found guilty, as an alien freedman in Roman service, he no longer had the rights of a free man. Like his immediate family he became imperial property. His family—you—will be sold and the proceeds will go to the imperial treasury to reimburse the amount he stole. It has been necessary for us to pay the Bargemen's Guild. They threaten another strike if we proceed against them for their own trespass."

She pulled away from him, swung around, felt dizzy, unable to comprehend the enormity of it. His hand steadied her.

"Gods! It can't be happening. Sold for a slave. No! They can't!" Staring up at him, remembering who he was, she wondered that she had been so stupid. Another must share the guilt. Another should suffer, as well.

"Will *she* be asked to cut her wrists? Will *her* family be sold into slavery?"

He seemed genuinely bewildered. "*She* who? What are we talking about?"

"The Lady Ancaris, commander. She approached my father, suggested the scheme, planned it, and took the eighteen thousand sesterces." As she spoke she shook off the terrible confusion that gripped her. Anger was a tonic at this moment. Especially when she saw how he looked at her with pity and doubt. "Then she ran away to Lugdunum with her profits, leaving my father to pay the penalty."

She noted the beginnings of anger, but he held a grip on

whatever indignation he felt. He said very quietly, "Your father confessed that he was alone in the scheme. *Carissima*, he was a broken man. Not physically," he added when she stiffened under his hands. "But in spirit. It came about, I think, when he was confronted with the final piece of evidence."

She had clothed herself in righteous fury and ignored this.

"Doubtless your precious wife has spent the eighteen thousand sesterces. Can't you trace her activities, discover what she has done with the money?"

He had let her go. He raised both hands. For some reason, he remained compassionate, and she found this maddening. She wanted to put him on the defensive, not to feel his pity, the aloof, superior quality that put him far above her, as master to slave.

"I won't trouble to defend my wife. I haven't respected her—much less loved her—for years." He read her stunned expression and added with a grim smile, "Yes. There are times when I have despised her. She is quite capable of doing a thing like this to your father. But our Roman courts rely upon evidence, and that, I'm afraid, shows no connection with Ancaris. Not in any essential. When were they together? When did she seduce him to this business? She has been much too busy lately seducing my second in command, a matter about which, I confess, I am indifferent."

She taunted him, "Examine your wife as you examined my father. You'll find the evidence. It stands to reason, when you find the eighteen thousand sesterces, you will have your real culprit."

He agreed, still with the pity she loathed. It put enormous barriers between them.

"Lysandra, my officers and I agree. It was this fact that brought about your father's confession . . . when we confronted him with the last and most crucial evidence."

"Not one of Lady Ancaris' lies?"

"The truth. Perseus' apartments have been thoroughly searched. About five hours ago they located the eighteen thousand silver sesterces, the entire amount. In a little coffer with Perseus' jewelry. Some rings. A neck circlet. Things I have seen him wear. You are a loyal daughter, and I admire you for it. But you yourself admit the eighteen thousand sesterces are crucial evidence."

Lysandra's head buzzed. It would be so easy to let herself fall into eternal darkness where there was no awakening to nightmare. Father was lucky, she thought. If I had a poniard!

But something in her revolted at the notion of yielding, letting these Romans who ravished the world destroy her as they had destroyed her weak father, with lies and compassion and a pretense of love. She felt the general's hand close around her wrist.

"Listen to me. I have a plan that will save you. You must do exactly as—"

She turned on him. He would not soon forget the blaze in her dark eyes. "Can you free me? Can you keep me from being enslaved?"

"It is the law." He sighed, tried again. "As imperial property you must be sent to Rome, where a decision will be made as to whether you are sold or remain in the service of the imperial palace."

She laughed. She was happy to see that the sound made him wince.

"If I am unlucky, I am bought for use in any bed, any brothel, any monstrous hole in Black Tartarus. If I am lucky, I become whatever Nero and his perverts want to make of me. Thank you. As you say, you have a plan. I'll wager you yourself might buy me. You might even take me to bed for a few nights. Then what will you do? Give me to that bitch whose father is your patron?"

He flushed darkly. She delighted in the sight of his discomfiture. In spite of everything, he managed to remain calm. "I do plan to buy you. Then, as soon as it won't look like a contrived business, I will have you officially freed. But meanwhile, you would be in the care of a very dear and good woman who is the emperor's closest confidante, Claudia Acté. It is the best arrangement I can make. I have to leave in a matter of minutes for Syria. But while you are in this condition, I am trying to have you protected. Acté will protect you in Rome."

All these statements meant nothing to Lysandra. He admitted his wife was capable of such a crime but claimed there was no evidence against her.

Obviously he intended to protect his position with his precious General Vespasian. She knew that her father's punishment and the destruction of her own freedom had been destined, no matter what happened to the Lady Ancaris, but her desire for vengeance was too overpowering.

"Then you aren't going to punish your wife?"

He looked as if he would lose the last shreds of his patience, and when he slapped the table top she jumped, but

she was glad to arouse him. She hated his kindness. Then he recovered all too quickly.

"For my own reasons, I have had my wife watched during every hour of the day and night. She has never been alone with Perseus at any hour."

Bewildered, Lysandra protested, "It was at night. After she pretended to go to her couch to sleep, she went through her Egyptian maid's room and took a small back passage to my father's office."

"Her Egyptian body-servant is one of my informants."

That ended her last hope. It was even possible her father had lied from the beginning. She groped for something to hold onto. His hand was there, but she avoided it.

"May I see my father's body?"

He hesitated. "If you wish."

"Thank you. And afterward, what happens to me?"

She knew she had relieved him, but it was necessary to think of her own future now. If he could save her from the worst fate of a female slave, she would follow his instructions, hating him all the while.

"Good. I will take you to your father. Then I want you to remain in your apartments until Enobarbus, the bowman, can arrange your passage to Rome. He is one of the men you saved in that street brawl the day you arrived. He owes you a debt."

Amid the buzzing and confusion in her head there were vague memories of the tough, friendly soldier who had escorted her to the Mercury Temple and then been pounced upon by the Lady Ancaris.

"I know him. He was kind one day."

"Then you understand you can trust him."

She nodded. He put his arm around her as one comforts a child, and started with her across the shadowed mosaics of the floor.

"I don't want you to leave your apartments until Enobarbus takes you to some conveyance or other. He is the best bowman in the legion and a loyal friend. You saw what happened with this interim governor, Pollus, tonight. I don't want you exposed to others like him. Not at your age."

She shivered. He clasped her shoulder firmly. "If you leave it to Enobarbus, you will be safe. As for Claudia Acté, she was once a slave herself. Emperor Nero freed her. He loved her very much and tried to marry her, but there was interference from his mother and, of course, the Senate."

"Eventually, he married three other women, however."

He paid no attention to her bitterness, smiling faintly as he insisted, "But Claudia Acté has always held a special place in his heart. She has strange ideas, gentle and compassionate. No one has ever hated her, not even Nero's wives. She will protect you. Now, can you possibly see that your life may not have ended?"

She shrugged, and he had to be satisfied with that. They were approaching the room in which her father had died, and she was unprepared. She felt no grief, only anger that was being succeeded by a numb sense of disbelief. None of this was happening. Tomorrow she would awaken in her bed, waited on by Daphne, and with a full day of pleasure before her. She had never thought, until very recently, what a slave's day must be like.

The guards stood aside. General Maximian opened the door and walked in ahead of her. He stopped abruptly, held out his arm as a barrier. "You don't want to remember him like this. Don't look. Think of him as he was."

She took a long, deep breath that cut into her ribs somewhere. She pushed aside his arm and said coldly, "I know him as he was. Weak and foolish and believing. Let me see him dead."

The general didn't like to hear that. Doubtless he preferred his women soft, incapable of hatred and bitterness. He would learn. She walked over to the bed. Her father had used hot water to hurry the process of his bleeding to death. Basins of it were clouded with blood. He lay half in and half out of his bed, with his head and arms dangling over the edge. She raised his head by the still-handsome head of hair. His eyes were open, which disconcerted her. She cried out. Maximian started to help her. She motioned him away.

In spite of all her intentions, the sight of her father's poor white face, so soft from good living, broke her down, and she kissed each of his eyes as she closed his eyelids. She didn't hate him after all. She felt only a great, overwhelming pity.

Poor Father, she thought. I hope they treat you better in Black Tartarus.

She prayed silently: Whatever gods you are, take care of him. He sinned from weakness and love. There are worse sins.

She felt choked with the torrent of weeping she sternly suppressed. She cleared her throat and said aloud, "Take me away from here. I have seen enough."

Chapter Six

The days passed with a rapidity that sometimes surprised Lysandra. Not being too familiar with the life of a slave, she had imagined she would be locked into some slave pen with a cofile of others for sale, and shipped down to Rome. Instead, she was permitted to keep Daphne as her companion until "a disposition was made of her case," as the interim governor, Pollus, informed her during his only visit to her guarded room.

Pollus would have liked to examine her more closely, but the minute he appeared in her doorway his steps were dogged by tough, rugged Enobarus, who refused to budge from Lysandra's side until the interim governor was gone.

One morning, just when Lysandra had begun to think this nightmarish uncertainty was to be her future world, Enobarbus came to give her some travel orders. After all her hours of dread she found herself almost relieved that the next step was taking place.

"Do I pack my clothes?" she asked coldly. She knew she owed Maximian's centurion her gratitude for saving her from Pollus as well as the guards on duty at her door. But in her mood she hated every Roman.

He wasn't offended but remained the soldier. "Your wardrobe and jewelry. Any souvenirs or money you own. But make it fast. I want to get away in the travel carriage your father hired for his escape, and I'd just as soon nobody here knows about it until we've gone."

Daphne was more excited than Lysandra, who started to pick up her property in silence.

"I'll see to it. Don't you worry, centurion . . . or can I call you Enobarbus?"

"Whatever is shortest. You girls be ready by the time I get back. I've got to get rid of Lysandra's guards. Think I'll spill a few sesterces down the steps. That'll get 'em away from your door."

He went out under the rain of Daphne's praise.

"You're so clever, Enobarbus! I do wonder where you got so smart."

Lysandra went around throwing things together. She told herself she owed a great deal to the centurion, even the privacy of her body. But it was hard, getting used to being coupled with the slave Daphne, as one of the "girls," and to be referred to so carelessly by her given name without any title.

What a snob I must be! She thought. But the resentment remained even when Enobarbus returned shortly, having made a racket by dropping small Roman coins, obols, and Greek drachmas down the main steps.

"They've gone. I'm charging it to General Max, though. Come along. The side steps to the wharf."

With Daphne still complaining that she had left her favorite sandals somewhere, the three hurried down the steps by which Lysandra had first entered the Palace of Justice. She looked back once, wondering if she was still the same young "lady" who had climbed these steps a few days ago. Only one thing remained to her. She still preserved her body for her own lover, whoever he might be. Perhaps, with the centurion's help, she could reach General Max's precious Claudia Acté, whoever that might be. Reach her without having been converted to an unwilling prostitute.

Remembering all this, she tried to be grateful to Enobarbus when she and Daphne were safely inside the curtained traveling carriage. The centurion had climbed up front to control the two horses, and they set off. Daphne whispered, "If Enobarbus was only younger! D'you know, Sandra, he could almost be good-looking, in a funny sort of way."

"He has been very kind to us. It doesn't matter what he looks like. He saved me."

Chatty Daphne raised her voice to remind Lysandra, "Oh, but it was that handsome General Max who saved you. Enobarbus is dear, but he is only carrying out the general's orders."

"The general? He killed my father. No. I much prefer Enobarbus to his noble commander."

Daphne started to object, saw the set of Lysandra's strong jaw, and gave up.

They rode out of Lutetia, leaving it as Lysandra had found it, a charming, busy little city, colder and more like February today, but far more intriguing than the heavily forested dark countryside on either side of the straight, well-paved highway

to the Gallic capital of Lugdunum. The centurion continued to treat the women with brusque friendliness, and by the time they had reached Lugdunum in Central Gaul at the end of the week, Lysandra and Enobarbus were friends.

She no longer resented his forgetting her old courtesy title, though it still made her wince when Daphne persisted in calling her Sandra, nudging and elbowing her, and even hinting on occasion that two of her best day gowns really looked better with Daphne's mass of red curls.

Lysandra did not give up any of the few clothes she had taken on the trip. In the darkness of her nights she often wondered where her clothing and even her food would come from if the emperor's ex-slave, Claudia Acté, had no interest in her. And finally, she realized that Enobarbus was more than her protector. He was her jailer. The arrow quiver at his back was full of weapons, not ornaments. It proved once and for all just what General Maximian's interest in her really amounted to. She was a piece of property belonging to the emperor.

Several times before they reached beautiful Lugdunum, queen city of Gaul, Lysandra made plans to escape. She very nearly succeeded in her first attempt by walking away from the travel carriage at night. The difficulty was that she had nowhere to go. She didn't know these deep woods, and she carried only the remnants of the travel money left over from her trip to Lutetia. She got as far as a little Gallic village in the heart of the woods only to find the natives hostile and uncomprehending.

She offered money for a horse. She was a good rider, having learned long ago as a child, when her sex did not interfere with riding bareback or winning a race from a male. But this too seemed strange to the villagers with primitive straw huts, a central fire pit, and half-naked citizens capering around her in the twisting shadows.

Just as she despaired of making them understand her, Enobarbus, the centurion-bowman, strode into the little circle illuminated by the fire pit.

"My wife," he announced to their relief, and took Lysandra's hand. "Come, *carissima*. I thought I'd lost you." He led her back out of the circle with one hand on his shortsword, and into the dank, dripping woods.

It occurred to her several times to scream, cry out, call for help, but her common sense told her this would mean nothing. She had stumbled onto lives that were determined to be-

lieve a female had no existence separate from the man who possessed her.

After that, she never got out of sight of Enobarbus, even when she tried on several occasions to wander off at some odd hour of the night.

"I am his prisoner," she told Daphne, who countered with a total lack of comprehension, "But you couldn't possibly live outside civilization."

Lysandra had given up temporarily by the time they reached Lugdunum, a city with marble temples, hillside villas, and a vigorous city life between two swift-flowing rivers. Here another problem presented itself. As a centurion in the Roman army, Enobarbus had to report to the legate of Gaul before proceeding further. It was necessary to obtain official permission before he purchased two vigorous young mares in furthering their journey to Massilia, where they would take ship for Rome.

Daphne was in love with the quiet little tavern in the triangle between the rivers that the centurion chose for their stay in Lugdunum. When Enobarbus had gone to pay his obligatory visit to the supreme ruler of Northern and Central Gaul, and Lysandra fetched up a dinner tray for Daphne and herself, Daphne asked breathlessly, "Did you see anyone interesting? I've seen several terribly attractive men coming into the tavern. Just look out that window there."

Lysandra set the tray down between them. "Sorry, but I'm afraid we are staying in a thieves' den."

Daphne shrieked.

Lysandra set out the dishes of smoking kid, grilled trout and greens, roast apples, and deep-boiled eggs. There was a goblet of the delicious local Gallic wine. She poured half into another goblet and drank a little. It gave her courage. She explained then, "All taverns are thieves' dens. Ladies are never seen in these places" She laughed shortly. "But then, we aren't ladies, are we?"

"Oh, but my lady—I mean, Sandra—it isn't so important being a freedwoman. I've had ever so much fun, just being me. In your service . . ."

Lysandra was stricken with remorse. Her whole nature softened for the first time since her father's death, and she touched Daphne's arm gently.

"Thank you, my friend. I can't tell you how grateful I am for your company. I don't think I could have gone through these depths if you hadn't shown me the way."

Daphne blushed. "Well, I'm sure I did my best. Are you going to eat that trout?"

"Not if you want it."

It was easy to please the girl, and since Lysandra was genuinely grateful to her, she gave Daphne the choice morsels of their dinner and afterward stood at the window embrasure, regardless of the chill night air that poured in when she pulled the leather curtain aside. The city lay before her, the streets dark like all streets at this hour of the evening, but on the hill beyond one of the swift-flowing rivers there were lights flickering, torches probably, where the legate was entertaining his grand visitors.

Once, she thought, they might even have invited the Lady Lysandra.

She wasn't interested in those wild sexual orgies which she assumed all Roman parties to be. But to be forbidden them almost overnight, to find herself despised and worse, ignored, as if she were part of the setting . . . it was too much.

"Selfish," she told herself. "Such a silly thing to cry about!" She blinked and turned back to the drab room with its high, heavy bed enclosed in an alcove, its rush-covered floor, badly made wooden stools, and a low, round table on three legs. There were several pegs in the wall where cloaks, pallas, and shawls might be hung. Any traveler entitled to wear a toga was likely to have civilian or military friends who would put him up for the night.

Even so, Lysandra knew they were lucky to be here. Other travelers were forced to share the single main room on the ground floor, where small braziers or brick ovens provided heat and the cooking of all food.

There were unexpected sounds outside. Lysandra looked down, surprised to see a curtained litter being set at the side of the inn door, just beyond the flickering tavern light. She caught her breath when the four litter bearers stood at attention and a thin woman shrouded from head to foot in an enveloping palla got out with the assistance of a female body-slave. There was no mistaking her golden hair.

The Lady Ancaris visiting this wretched tavern? Lysandra caught her breath. It seemed likely the general's wife was coming to see the daughter of the man she had destroyed. It was almost, though not quite, impossible that Enobarbus could have betrayed Lysandra's presence. Where was he now? What had happened to him when he went to make his official call upon the legate?

With a strong sense of danger Lysandra turned quickly to Daphne. "General Max's wife is here."

Daphne gave a little anxious yelp. "We need Enobarbus."

"I'm afraid she has seen him first. How else would she know how to find me?"

She reached the door, opened it a crack, and looked out. "Too late. She is coming up the stairs."

"What'll we do? Can she have us killed? Can she—?"

"Sh! Don't let her know she can frighten us. We are imperial property, after all. She has no power over us."

Nevertheless, the brisk scratching on the door sent a chill along Lysandra's spine. She made no effort to greet the visitor but stood haughtily in the middle of the room until Ancaris' body-slave pushed the door open and bowed low as her mistress rustled past her into the room. Ancaris was gracious, flashing her gentle, glittering smile.

"My poor girl! Enobarbus, that rogue, has been telling me what happened to you after I left Lutetia."

"Enobarbus told you I was here?"

"Certainly. How else would I know? Poor Enobarbus may be the greatest soldier in Northern Gaul, but like some others I've known, he simply cannot hold his liquor."

Lysandra felt that this was a lie. Ancaris had come here in a great hurry. Beneath her enveloping palla she still wore the sparkling cloth-of-gold gown she must have worn to the legate's Roman supper.

Lysandra made no effort to encourage the woman, who smiled and shrugged at these bad manners before seating herself daintily on one of the little stools.

"Do you suppose we might be alone for a few minutes? Girl, run along and talk to my servant. Artazostris, keep the little redhead occupied."

The ancient Persian woman beckoned to Daphne, who followed her out into the passage, but her sandals shuffled over the floor and she gave Lysandra a last desperate glance.

"Now, then." Ancaris seemed perfectly at home. "Do tell me, if it isn't too painful, how this appalling thing happened. I understand it began with some sort of mischief your father got into. Some bargeman persuaded him to accept a bribe? Gods! We all know cases like this. They happen all the time."

What was she after?

Lysandra considered the woman's curiosity. Even her pretended sympathy was excessive. Ancaris had spoken to Lysandra only once, at the time of their meeting in the Temple

of Mercury. Their single connection was the private secretary, Perseus. This fact provided the clue Lysandra was seeking. Perseus had told the truth about this woman's part in his crime. Ancaris was anxious to find out how much of the true story Lysandra knew.

At the same time, it would be calamitous for Lysandra if the woman realized Perseus' daughter had been told the entire story. Judging by her cynical abandonment of Perseus, Ancaris would go to any lengths to destroy Lysandra if she suspected the girl knew her part in the crimes.

Lysandra was neither surprised nor shocked to discover Ancaris' guilt, but it took enormous self-control to keep from showing her deep hatred.

"I too am confused, my lady. They said my father was guilty of bribery and then he killed himself, and I was told I must be sold as a slave. Have you heard any more of the story?"

"I? Certainly not. Then this is the story as you know it?"

Lysandra tried to frame her face to innocence. "There can't be any more. Just this bribery, as they called it. And poor Father dying." She took a breath, proceeded blandly, "All for such a silly reason. As if they could trace the hand that changed those accounts of the Rhine cohort borrowed by Lutetia."

"They couldn't possibly know that." Ancaris dismissed the matter, her pale, smooth forehead faintly corrugated. "There was no way to trace the writing of—" She broke off, glanced at Lysandra.

In spite of all Lysandra's efforts, the sharp, sudden understanding was there in her wide black eyes for the Lady Ancaris to read. Lysandra looked down hurriedly, studying her fingers as if they were the beginning and end of her world.

"I've no doubt you are right, my lady. But Father confessed. There was nothing that could save Father after that." She was thinking: What would happen if I simply killed her now? There is a meat knife on the little table. I could do it so easily. But I might be strangled or crucified for it.

The horror of this thought kept her itching hands at her sides. Aloud, she changed the subject rapidly. "I didn't know the centurion was a heavy drinker."

"Centurion?" Ancaris echoed. Clearly, she had forgotten her story about Enobarbus and how she had learned of Lysandra's presence in Lugdunum. Still busy guessing how

much Lysandra knew, she recovered enough to wave away this subordinate matter. "The stronger they look, the weaker they may be. With my husband as example. He stopped on his way across the Mediterranean to complain about that unfortunate father of yours. What was his name?"

Lysandra cleared her throat. "Perseus. I—I thought the general was in too great a hurry to stop at Lugdunum."

Ancaris smiled. "How typical of dear Max! He is a brutal man with women; yet he pursues them for some perverse reasons of his own." She sighed. "Why he puts on that sweet, reasonable air with casual acquaintances, I will never know. He did boast that his centurion, Enobarbus, would be through here soon with a present for Caesar. You, my dear, are that present. Poor Max has no delicacy."

Lysandra felt that her effort to remain impassive under that malevolent gaze was the hardest she had ever endured.

"I suspected as much," she said, which was more or less true. Whatever the ambivalence in her feelings about the centurion, Enobarbus, she never ceased to hate General Maximian. He had sentenced her father. He had condemned her and sent her as a slave to Rome, and worst of all, he had let her believe his feelings for her were more than compassionate, were personal. All lies. Even if the serpentlike Ancaris had not boasted of it, Lysandra knew her greatest betrayer had been Maximian.

Ancaris nodded. "A pity no one ever found out where Perseus learned to change the army payroll accounts." Though her voice was soft, her golden eyes studied Lysandra, who found herself unable to resist this last sly prodding.

"Accountants usually learn from someone, I imagine Father had a good teacher."

Ancaris exhaled as if finally satisfied. Lysandra knew she had betrayed her knowledge of the woman's part in the crime, but it had been inevitable. She couldn't conceal her bitter hatred of the woman forever.

Ancaris stood and moved to the door. "Zostra, I am ready now." Over her shoulder she said to Lysandra, "You and I have learned a bitter lesson in our lives. Never trust a man. They are all cowards, and incurable gossips. Farewell, my dear."

Long after the woman had left, Lysandra lay awake wondering what had been gained by Ancaris and lost by Lysandra as a result of this visit.

Without guessing exactly what the "serpent's" plan was, Lysandra knew it had begun the next morning when she and Daphne were aroused by a sinister-looking, black-bearded Syrian in desert burnoose and headpiece who ordered the two women down to their traveling carriage at dawn "for an early beginning."

"Where is Enobarbus?" Lysandra demanded as she and Daphne were boosted into the covered cart.

The Syrian's teeth flashed within the dirty forest of his beard. "The Roman is drunk, with a head as delicate as a duck egg. He'll join you at Massilia. Meanwhile, I am El Kedar, slave dealer of Damascus and Ostia, the seaport of Rome. I am to assist the Roman in transporting his property." Before Lysandra could open her mouth to protest, he asked sharply, "Are either of you virgins?"

Daphne blushed and giggled, hiding the sound with her knuckles. Obviously she was no virgin. Lysandra was inwardly shaken but tried not to show it.

"This is no concern of yours, Syrian."

For a minute she thought he agreed, but she did not like his quick, "Very well. I have my answer. The law says that no virgin may be subject to punishment. It is a matter easily settled. Enjoy our journey, girls. We are lucky that the highways are so good in this part of the world. I have seen roads in Parthia and the East that you could not believe were more than goat tracks."

Lysandra ignored this and settled in the carriage, trying not to worry about his "virginity" talk. Few women of seventeen were virgins, in any case. Small wonder that he might be confused about her state.

They traveled rapidly as the slave dealer had predicted, but this only put more space between them and Enobarbus. Even Daphne, who seldom observed anything farther away than the nearest available male, whispered to Lysandra, "I don't like that man. I'll wager he did something to poor Enobarbus."

Lysandra nodded. It was now absolutely essential to escape. If she and Daphne could get to Massilia, she felt that someone she and Perseus had known might aid them. There was always the strong probability that these friends would be too much afraid of the Roman government to connive at stealing imperial property. But it was the only chance the two young women had.

El Kedar stopped in the hills outside a small town, shortly

after the sixth hour. He offered Lysandra and Daphne some bread, goat cheese, and the local wine. Too much wine, Lysandra thought, as if he wanted to make the girls helpless for sinister reasons of his own. Daphne would have drunk it all, but Lysandra stopped her, tilting the goblet onto the ground, which was carpeted with pine needles from the fall and soggy from winter rains. Still suspicious, Lysandra was a little surprised when the slaver ordered them back into the big wagon and drove on.

Lysandra waited until she heard him growling orders to the two horses. Then she gave the anxious Daphne her instructions.

"Gather up your heaviest cloak and any valuable jewelry you might have."

"Why, my lady—I mean, Sandra?"

"We've got to get out of this thing while we are moving. We run into that thicket we saw on the hillside."

"Not while we are moving!"

"Yes. Now!"

Utterly confused, the girl looked around, snatched a broken piece of bread. Lysandra whispered impatiently, "No, no. Valuables. The little bracelet you wear. Any money you may have." To her surprise Daphne reached under her mattress and pulled out a little bag of coins, but then, after peering out nervously, she drew back. Lysandra slipped out between the curtains, swung off to the paving blocks, and then caught Daphne, who slipped in terror and just missed turning her ankle. The wagon moved on. Lysandra took the girl's hand and ran across the road, pushed her way through the bushes, and dragged Daphne behind her.

She had a vague notion of the region's geography, having come north by this highway several weeks ago, but only minutes after they escaped she heard a disturbance on the highway, which was now slightly below them. The Syrian had discovered they were missing. And worse, two Roman horsemen had met him in the road, apparently by prearrangement. Daphne dragged along, trying to get her breath.

"Why are we running?" she asked, beginning to reveal stubborn tendencies. "Those Romans don't look too bad, and they are always generous." She waved the little bag of coins in her free hand.

Lysandra almost gave her up. She could no longer hear the voices on the highway below them and pulled Daphne angrily, not taking time or breath to explain. They found it

easier going after breaking out of the thicket, and even Daphne picked up her feet to run across the slippery pine needles of a little clearing on the hillside.

Just as they reached the far border of the clearing and started into the woods again and Lysandra was thanking whatever gods might be listening, a pair of heavy, callused hands seized her around the waist and swung her off her feet. She screamed, trying to pry herself free of the vise of those hands. One of the Roman soldiers looked into her face, laughing, enjoying the tussle which could only end with his victory. He had removed helmet and armor, and when she kicked him he winced but then let her slip through his hands until he was pinching the tips of her breasts between each thumb and forefinger. She struggled, but he increased the pressure.

She let herself collapse suddenly, hoping to catch him unawares, but he picked her up like old laundry and carried her downhill toward the travel wagon. One of his hands caressed her breast and the other, tight around her hips, tried to explore her groin while she stiffened all her muscles to thwart his pleasure.

The skirt of her wool gown was little protection. She wore only a shift under the gown. This ended just above the warm black triangle of hair protecting the secret regions of her body, and it was easy enough to carry out his intentions, once he threw her onto her narrow couch in the wagon.

She cried out but could scarcely hear herself as his body dropped down hard upon hers, knocking the breath out of her. One hand cupped her left breast, still with its playfulness that kept the pink nipple hard under his working fingers. With her body imprisoned beneath his, his other hand persisted between her thighs. She could feel his callused fingers as her thighs parted in spite of all her fierce muscular effort to forbid him entry.

His big, ruddy face blurred before her eyes. Something huge and swollen, far greater than his rough fingers, was thrust into the sheath of her body. She screamed, the sound muffled by his thick, wine-tasting mouth that sucked at her lips, trying to pry them open as he had pried open her body to enter it.

The pain of his penetration had been sharp, sudden and then numbing. He was still within her, probing, thrusting. She writhed and moaned, hating him, hating herself for being

aroused, most of all hating the man who had promised to save her and left her to this fate.

For an interminable time they were joined. Her shocked mind and body lost all sense of the act itself. She had been assaulted, and at last he withdrew and her body was cold and free.

He adjusted his tunic, looking more ruddy and breathless than before his rape of her body. He patted her stomach, and she pulled her skirt down frantically.

"Good girl! Best virgin I've ever had. Nothing to worry about now, *carissima*. That delicious body of yours will be much smoother for your next customer." He reached into his belt for something, and while she stared at him, only half conscious of his loathsome grin, he threw down a dozen sesterces.

She didn't even know his name so she could seek him out one day and kill him.

When he climbed out of the wagon she found the money and started to throw it out. Then she heard Daphne's giggle near the wagon, and she remembered Daphne's wisdom.

I am a different woman now, she thought. It's over and it doesn't matter. I'll get my revenge somehow. Above all, I'll avenge Father and myself on Maximian and his wife.

Meanwhile, she must save every obol. Money was always handy, as Daphne would say.

Chapter Seven

On the bitter journey to the slave markets of Rome, Lysandra learned to understand Daphne's view of life. The body-slave was more amoral than cynical and repeated her view so often Lysandra began to wonder if her own ideals about sex had been childish. This was a vicious world, Daphne said, pointing out that female slaves had only one weapon and one tool, the careful cultivation of their sexual abilities.

"You see, Sandra, it's nothing. Sex can be like—like a stranger coming up and putting his finger in your mouth."

"Daphne, you really are disgusting!" Lysandra was revolted by this view of something she had always believed was a mutually pleasurable union, sanctified by the Gallic religion, or by the pontifex maximus, head of the Roman religion.

In order to whip up color into the girls' pallid faces, El Kedar and his mute giant assistant, taken on at Massilia, brought Daphne and Lysandra up on the open deck of the little bireme. The girls were being carried down the Italian coast to Ostia, the great seaport of Rome.

Lysandra turned away from the rail and her view of the rugged, sunny coastline as if she could turn away from Daphne's terrible common sense. But she saw the grinning slave dealer, who stood watching her from the companionway leading down to the slave deck. Seeing him only as a symbol of her fall from freedom and decency, she became aware that she was no longer wasting hatred on this dirty, bearded creature. She reminded herself that the Romans were her real ravishers, and one Roman in particular, General Maximian. If he hadn't reassured her so often, she could have run away, escaped from Lutetia, and be free now.

Daphne's red curls were blowing in the salt wind. She had never looked prettier. Lysandra wondered at her indifference to fate, and her future. Had she no fears, no dread of the man or men who would buy her in Rome? Apparently not. The girl tossed her head, laughed, and actually said, "Isn't it exciting?

A new adventure. And in the greatest city in the world. Oh! I can hardly wait."

Lysandra murmured, "Daphne, I envy you, I really do," and meant it.

By midafternoon El Kedar began to organize his property for departure. The steersman at the tiller was easing into the crowded harbor of Ostia. He took his signals from a sailor standing above the sharp steel ramming beak at the prow. All around the two-banked galley muddy waters churned and foamed with activity.

Viewing all this excitement, Lysandra found herself as interested as Daphne, who pointed out tiny vessels with triangular lateen sails—"they probably deal with Parthian pirates"—and great barges—"Goods from Piraeus, the Athenian port"—and a splendid trireme, its three banks of oars impressively working together—"I'll wager it's an Egyptian grain ship. They take precedence over everything."

Duly impressed, Lysandra enjoyed the view until called back to reality by the slave dealer. She could never get used to being ordered around. She became mulish every time El Kedar gave an order and the mute giant grabbed her upper arm, propelling her along. She felt herself being dragged to the companionway, and she deliberately scuffed her sandals over the warped deck, as she had done when she was taken aboard the gallery at Massilia.

That time she had been cuffed across the ear so hard her head rang. But nothing had prevented her being transported to the tiny cabin she was to share with Daphne. She had dreaded the inevitable rape by El Kedar once the bireme set sail out of Massilia's big harbor, but he hadn't touched her body or Daphne's.

Daphne explained, "He wants us fresh for the Roman market. He's only the merchant. We are his merchandise. He has to be awfully careful with you, as imperial property."

It had proved to be true. It was the only fact Lysandra could look back on with gratitude. But it also made her dread the arrival at Rome even more. Abandoning all dignity, she caught at anything, even a passing sailor, to slow the mute Libyan, who ignored this. He merely boosted her higher until her sandals no longer touched the deck in spite of her furious struggles.

Panic had set in with the mute's first touch on this sunny afternoon. She knew even while she struggled that it would be useless. Not a single man on the galley would help her.

There was no possibility of escape. Until her fate was decided by the Emperor Nero's representatives, she belonged to the slave dealer, and no Roman would interfere with a man's private property. It was against every Roman law.

The mute carried her down the companion ladder under one powerful arm. She had lost a sandal, her heel was bruised, and her right thigh had a three-inch scratch that upset El Kedar when they reached the cubicle he had taken for the two girls on this voyage. He ordered the mute to throw her on the hard army cot. Then, amid her struggles, he pulled her skirt up to her hip and applied a perfumed unguent on the long, bloody scratch.

"That ought to hide it. Don't want to spoil the beauty of that body, let me tell you. It's your stock in trade." He gave her exposed hip a smart slap and ordered the anxious Daphne, "Get her into this new gown. I want you both to look your best." Catching Lysandra's murderous scowl as she shook down her skirt over her nakedness, he reminded her reasonably, "It's to your advantage, girl, to look your best. You! Get her ready."

He went away with the Libyan to attend to some contraband cargo, leaving Daphne the difficult job of dressing her former mistress in the green silk-thread gown of an expensive imperial prostitute. Its waistline and hips were outlined by a double chain of shining silver coins.

Daphne dropped the gown over Lysandra's head. The dress covered Lysandra's left breast, two fragile layers of silk tied at the shoulder to hold it on her body. Her right breast was apparently expected to appear naked in public. Lysandra's well-curved body had always been evident, even through her most respectable gowns. It deeply shocked her to know she was expected to show herself half-naked. With one hand covering the golden flesh, she looked at her reflection in the polished silver mirror that Daphne held up. She laughed bitterly.

"If I were that monster Ancaris, I'd have nothing to worry about. She is as flat as a reed."

"You have such a beautiful body," Daphne rattled on with nervous eagerness. "All you need to be fantastically popular is to have your right nipple painted red and the aureole a little darker. Everyone will adore you. You might even become the emperor's mistress. That's how the Lady Acté began."

Lysandra had flushed darkly at Daphne's notion of attracting fresh attention to her figure, but now a tiny hope began

to bud inside her. "Is that the Lady Claudia Acté, a friend of the emperor's? I was supposed to see her. Enobarbus said he would take me to her. She was supposed to save me from mistreatment."

Daphne's big eyes widened. "Wonderful. Maybe you could get a message to her before someone else in the palace takes you. I mean—who wants a prefect or a councillor when one might have Nero himself?"

Lysandra could never make Daphne understand that the idea of prostituting herself to the emperor was no better than having herself enslaved to some aging imperial councillor. The horror lay in the slavery, not the master.

"Maybe I can get a message to this Claudia Acté. I wonder . . ." She considered Daphne. "The Libyan seems to be nicer to you than to me."

Daphne giggled. "I treat him nicer. After all, even though he can't talk and he's bald, he's still a man. Did you ever really look at those rippling muscles of his? And have you ever seen him naked? I did, the other day when he was bathing on deck. I tell you, you wouldn't believe how big—"

Lysandra cut her off, feeling sick to her stomach at the idea that talk like this was the only hope she had. "Good. Can you get him to carry a message?"

Daphne hesitated, sucked in her plump cheeks, and rolled her eyes. "I could work on him. I could be very nice. Sandra! You must promise me something in return." She hugged her former owner, her hands cool on Lysandra's bare shoulder, reminding Lysandra again of her own embarrassment.

She said hurriedly, "Yes. I promise." She freed herself, reached for the old woolen gown she had been wearing. No decoration, no sash or palla. Nothing with which to cover herself.

She began to finger the box of their meager property that El Kedar had agreed to take on board. Luckily, she found the crimson gauze scarf he had used to bind her sleek black hair against the sea wind. She draped it around her exposed breast and tied the two ends of gauze, front and back, on her right shoulder. Hardly a modest covering but an improvement over her former nakedness.

"If the Romans turn me into a harlot," she promised herself, "then, by the gods, I'll be the most dangerous harlot Rome ever knew. And no matter how long it takes, I'll pay back those who used me and brought me to this!"

Maximian had lied to her and abandoned her. His wife

and Enobarbus had contrived to put her in El Kedar's hands to be raped and degraded, and all of them would pay.

Watching the fierce determination in her face, Daphne reminded her, "You promised." Daphne herself made no objection to the exposure of her breast and what it signified in the eyes of a purchaser. She had merchandise and was delighted to exhibit it.

Lysandra brushed herself off, careful to smooth all wrinkles out of the exquisite silk. She smiled at her former slave, relieving the girl by her apparent acceptance of their fate.

"I promised. You will share the emperor's couch with him if I have any power at all."

Around them the squeak of oarlocks stilled abruptly. They heard the anchor chains rattle, and not knowing what horrors might lie before them when they went ashore, they took each other's hands and clung together briefly.

Minutes later, they heard the heavy slap of the Libyan mute's sandaled feet on the companion ladder outside their door. The noise sickened Lysandra as always by its reminder of her helpless condition, but she continued to keep a facade of cool dignity. When the mute pushed the door open, Daphne kept her own promise to Lysandra and stepped in front of her, reaching out, running her finger along the mute's powerful, hairy forearm.

"You've come to take us ashore. You will be gentle, won't you, dear Sekmit."

Lysandra marveled at the girl's honey-sweet voice, and her apparently genuine interest in the mute. But she was grateful. Daphne purred in her sweet way, dimpling and fussing over him so that Lysandra wasn't surprised when he hustled her and Daphne out ahead of him with a slightly more gentle manner than usual. He even surprised her by a distinct crease about his thick, fleshy mouth as he watched the dainty movements of Daphne. He was actually smiling.

So much the better.

Lysandra tried to do her part. To protect herself from the base degradation to which she had sunk, she retained her proud carriage, holding her head high, and when she remembered not to antagonize her present owner, who threw her a thin palla to warm her nearly bare shoulders, she bestowed upon El Kedar a sensuous, full-lipped smile that dazzled him. He stopped abruptly on the deck, his tongue flicking over the wiry hair that circled his mouth.

The Libyan lifted Lysandra down the ship's ladder to a boat with four oarsmen. It was difficult to find room to sit down. the Libyan then carried Daphne down with a definite new awareness of the girl's hips. Lysandra spent these minutes wondering what was in all these sacks, bags, and boxes. She had heard a sailor hinting that the slave dealer, El Kedar, also did a profitable smuggling business. Such items as Gallic wines would prove a serious threat if there had been no tariff set up to protect the wines of Italy. And there were oils, marvelous cooking oils that Lysandra's family and neighbors in Massilia declared were better than the very best in Italy. Wool, silver, any number of smuggled products could give El Kedar a nice profit if he got them past the Roman customs inspectors.

Lysandra took note of every box, every mysterious parcel. One never knew when the knowledge might be useful. But the Mediterranean waters were brisk and windy at this hour of the afternoon, and she huddled into the palla, brought back to her present situation again. She knew the disgusting label that would be fastened upon her by these admiring oarsmen if they should get a look at the green silk gown, the single clinging garment she wore beneath the wool palla. No Roman lady would ever be seen in such a dress.

The port was busy enough in normal times, but everything had been turned upside down by Nero's order. They were dredging the harbor and building another breakwater and wharves, all of which, El Kedar said, were being built at the same time, with crews working all night and all day in three shifts. "To take care of the unemployed," he went on.

"It's ever so grand," Daphne bubbled enthusiastically, and Lysandra agreed. She had decided, a bit late in the day, that it might disarm the slave dealer if she put a better face on the situation.

El Kedar himself almost lost his perennial sly grin when he was interrupted on the stone dock while landing his cargo. He had just ordered the Libyan to put the girls in the wagon on top of his other property.

The newcomer was an elegant Roman of forty or so, wearing what clearly was a toupee whose color didn't quite match his thin wisps of hair. Whatever the faults of the toupee, he was carefully wrapped in the requisite toga which so many citizens regarded as the great curse of citizenship, since it often took a man or his slaves half an hour to get the folds

properly arranged. But this exquisite courtier was perfectly dressed, every fold in place in spite of the March wind.

"Hail, friend Kedar." He added with gentle sarcasm, "Wasn't it lucky I had business in Ostia? Otherwise I might never have known you were landing two more of your lovely creatures for the pleasure of Rome."

"Imperial property, sent by General Maximian, Master Otho." The title was a courtesy one, but the Roman, Salvius Otho, waved a hand glistening with rings as if he accepted the title in earnest.

"Precisely. But friend Kedar, things are very unsettled in the capital. Or haven't you heard? Nero is still away in Greece, singing his head off, and there are some who whisper that he has sung himself out of office, so to speak. If there are changes, you might do well to regard me as the recipient of your 'imperial property.' "

El Kedar was equal to the threat. "And no one will cry 'Hail, Caesar' louder than I, Master Otho, when you are the emperor. Meanwhile, I am only a poor merchant who has his orders direct from General Maximian, the governor of Lute-tia."

Salvius Otho corrected El Kedar in his smooth way.

"But our dear Max, that paragon of loyal officers, is no longer in Gaul. I have it on good authority he has taken command of General Vespasian's legions in the Near East. Old Vespasian is over in Greece vowing eternal fidelity to Nero. It's just like the old fool. For two obols he could command the armies of the empire . . . if I were emperor."

Lysandra was listening with great interest. The conversation only placed a seal upon her hatred of Maximian and his wife. There could be no question that they were responsible for the horror of her own life. But the intrigue she overheard might be useful, as well.

She studied the soft, effete features of Salvius Otho, a man with notorious sexual tastes. But there was a hard streak of ambition within that weak flesh, and Lysandra seemed to find indications in his small, calculating eyes. She remembered that Otho had surrendered his beautiful wife, Poppaea Sabina, without a murmur when his friend Nero wished to make her empress. Was he now plotting against his onetime friend in a belated revenge?

In spite of his soft sensuality, Lysandra decided he was at heart an ambitious schemer. She wondered if Nero or his loyal confidante, Claudia Acté, knew what he was up to.

In Lysandra's predicament, she found this conversation was grist for the mill. She had never believed she could be so devious. Life did it, she excused herself—life and these Romans who had ravished the world for their own glory and pleasure. She refused to let her conscience trouble her as she listened and mentally filed away the information she heard.

Waving his arms eloquently, El Kedar bowed to the Roman, his striped burnoose flapping in the wind. "Forgive me, excellency. I have appointments with the imperial chamberlain and others. They will be expecting me."

The sensualist appeared to give up. He watched casually as the Libyan climbed into the wagon with a length of corded hemp and began to bind Lysandra's left wrist to Daphne's right.

"Try not to scrape their wrists," the slave dealer reminded the big mute.

Otho went to the wagon and looked in. "So charitable! One would never suspect you of tenderness, Kedar." He reached in, his fingers gently tracing the flesh of Daphne's wrist beneath the cord. Daphne cringed away from his first touch. Her eyes gazed up at him, big and scared.

"Tenderness?" El Kedar repeated, shocked at such a misunderstanding. "A blemish means an imperfect product."

Otho's smile was gentle. "Not always, and not to me. It often adds piquancy. I myself find it stimulates my desire. What a pretty little creature! So helpless. Someone should look out for her. The palace is no place for such a little bird."

Daphne responded to his sweet smile, which was another mark in her favor, as far as he was concerned. Otho's hand approached Lysandra's body. She bit her lip to keep from crying out her revulsion. Luckily for her, El Kedar stopped him. "Not that one, excellence. She definitely belongs to the imperial house."

"And the other?"

"Too expensive, Master Otho."

Daphne leaned toward the Roman, letting her cloak fall away, and to Lysandra's continuing amazement, her mouth promised much. She stressed the point by moistening her lips. Otho caught his breath.

"How much?"

"Thirty thousand sesterces," El Kedar said quickly.

"Ridiculous."

Lysandra made a brief, silent prayer: The gods be thanked!

But Otho's tastes were whetted by the close proximity of Daphne's round young body in its rust-colored prostitute's gown and by the curling tendrils of her long red hair that tickled the back of his hand as he reached out to touch what was so freely offered.

"Ten thousand."

El Kedar gave orders to the Libyan. "Take the reins. We are late. Looks like we'll be arriving in Rome in the middle of the night. And you know what those streets are like after dark. Full of rowdies and cutthroats."

Daphne leaned closer to Otho. His knuckles brushed against her mouth.

The Roman sighed. "Twenty thousand. Not an obol more."

"Twenty-five."

Daphne teased him, "I thought future Roman emperors had all the money they wanted."

Otho turned away and walked a few steps along the quay, followed by Daphne's soft little giggle. He turned so suddenly no one except Daphne was ready for him. El Kedar had already climbed up beside the mute and given the signal to start the impatient horses.

"All right. Twenty-five."

Salvius Otho reached the wagon and without thinking, tried to lift Daphne out. Her hand was still attached to Lysandra's wrist and both girls screamed.

"Free the girl!" Otho demanded, furious to have his property in his own hands and unable to use it.

While El Kedar untied the girls, Daphne hushed Lysandra's protests happily. "I know what I'm doing. Dear Sandra, I'll wager you a hundred drachmas I'll be in the emperor's bed before you. Good luck," and as soon as her wrist was free, she let herself be lifted out into the arms of the Roman.

"My payment," El Kedar demanded.

With the girl in his arms Otho looked around and signaled to his body-slave, who was waiting at the end of the wharf.

"My man Lucipor will give you my note in the amount of twenty-five thousand. Farewell, Kedar. But remember this: I will have my worth out of this slave or I will have my twenty-five thousand sesterces back, when I am emperor."

With the cord still dangling from her wrist, Lysandra watched the Roman disappear with her only friend. "Gods, be gentle to her," she prayed, badly shaken.

El Kedar was busy dealing with Salvius Otho's slave, receiving the receipt for the sale of "one female slave of Greek origin answering to the name of Daphne." When he had taken the note of Salvius Otho in the amount of twenty-five thousand sesterces to be redeemed at the House of Flacchus and Sons in Rome, he ordered the Libyan mute into the back of the wagon to guard Lysandra.

"This one is the prize, Sekmit. She is worth a dozen of the other. Don't let her move. Seal her to you, but no sexual play. You understand? That pleasure will be reserved for the imperial household."

Sekmit nodded, climbed on top of the boxes in the back of the wagon, and settled down beside Lysandra.

She felt sick with the loss of her companion and paid little attention when the mute tied the hemp cord to her wrist and his own. He was sad too. Curiously enough, he shared her feeling of loss.

"Off to Rome," El Kedar called out and shook the reins.

Chapter Eight

Lysandra had spent all of her nearly eighteen years hearing about Rome, wondering about and tantalized by its reputation as both the glory and the sewer of the world. While the wooden wheels of the wagon rattled and bumped over the cobblestones of the Ostian Way toward Rome, Lysandra tried to drag her thoughts from her own fate to the city itself. Would there be any hope? She wasn't naive enough to imagine she could escape and still survive, even in that great city with its population of a million citizens, slaves, and alien visitors on business or pleasure.

The city's reputation for splendor no longer interested her, but its awe-inspiring power could be useful. After the first hour she was able to face her future. Her dread of Daphne's fate began to recede behind self-serving excuses.

It had been Daphne's choice, after all. The girl must know the perverse tastes of the effete Roman. He had made them clear enough with his talk of the "blemishes" (and pain?) that kindled his desires. But what if poor Daphne hadn't guessed the truth? Was it possible she could be an innocent on the subject of perversion, yet so casual about the sexual act itself?

Daphne's eagerness to be involved with a man who called himself the next emperor in no way lessened her value as a companion to Lysandra. The hideous world of slavery had been made just a little easier for Lysandra because Daphne knew that world.

So much for my own compassion, Lysandra reminded herself during the ride inland to her fate in Rome. Is it only poor Daphne's usefulness that I miss?

She couldn't help it. She dreaded the arrival more than ever, with Daphne gone.

In the early-spring twilight Lysandra made out orchards and cultivated fields, tree-shrouded villas, and in the distance, always high on the horizon, the great, arched aqueducts carrying clean water to thirsty Rome.

True to El Kedar's prediction, it was already dark when they reached the Ostian Gateway into Rome. She did not need the Libyan's guttural sounds, his powerful, pointing finger, to know that they were entering the capital of the civilized world. It was the first sound the Libyan had uttered since the departure of Daphne. Nor had he molested Lysandra in any way. He seemed lost in dreams of the vanished girl, and often sat up, peering backward into the darkness as if he hoped to catch a glimpse of the slave girl. In spite of his post as her jailer, Lysandra pitied him.

The city itself was hilly and crowded, most of its streets appearing even narrower between the six and seven-story walls of the tenements where fashionable Rome leased the lower floors and the less fortunate rented the attics and high, fire-prone rooms. Little of the grandeur of its public buildings was visible at first in the darkness, since the streets were not lighted and the police and fire patrols, called the *vigiles*, could not be everywhere at once.

It seemed to Lysandra that the entire center of the city, even encroaching on the historic Old Forum, was given over to the endless marble buildings connected by colonnades, porticoes, and streets sealed off from the public. El Kedar looked back to assure himself that Lysandra was still safely corded to the Libyan mute. He waved his whip, indicating the conglomeration of marble and stone and gardens.

"What do you think of that, girl? It's Nero's Golden House. He tore out an entire section of the city to build a dwelling fit for an emperor. Made a few enemies doing it, too, space being so hard come by."

She didn't answer. It was impossible to be civil to him in spite of all her good resolutions. But he went on calling her attention to the width of the Sacred Way which ran through the Old Forum in the canyon between two hills, and he pointed out the noble temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus crowning the Capitoline Hill above the Forum. It was only one of many white marble buildings in the heart of the city and she couldn't remember them all, but with the moonlight gleaming on their columns and porticoes, they impressed her more than she would have admitted to anyone.

It was hard to believe that only four years ago the Great Fire had wiped out three quarters of the city. In the moonlit dark the remaining blackened holes of that conflagration were mercifully hidden.

El Kedar brought the horses to a halt on a steep little alley

behind the huge Circus Maximus. They were at the end of the sprawling imperial palace on Palatine Hill. Lysandra's heart beat faster. Even her fingertips were cold. She prayed to her favorite goddess, Minerva-of-the-Gray-Eyes, then decided cynically that the virginal Minerva could not help her here. She must turn to Venus. The love goddess was a kind of exalted Daphne. It might be necessary to rely upon the wiles of Venus from this moment on.

One of two iron-studded doors opened. A pair of Praetorian Guards strolled out, glorious in their bright metal and red-plumed helmets. They glanced at the wagon, barely made out a black-haired woman wrapped in a wool palla, who seemed to be guarded by a North African giant.

"Servants' door around the corner," one of them called to El Kedar without rancor.

His companion added, "Any merchandise to show us?"

"No, centurion. Imperial business. A good night to you."

Losing interest, the guards sauntered away, continuing a conversation about the second wife of an aged senator. A fat, jovial slave in a long Greek chiton opened one of the doors again, hailed El Kedar, and, seeing the wagonload of the dealer's goods, pulled the other door open. El Kedar drove into a narrow grassy courtyard several steps below a series of columns and a mosaic portico.

"Had a bit of luck, I see," the doorkeeper remarked, looking over Lysandra as Sekmit lifted her down, her wrist still bound to his.

"All for the imperial coffers. Don't touch."

The doorkeeper snatched his hands back as if they had been burned. "Wouldn't dream of it. Never catch me interfering with Helios, that damned eunuch who pimps for Nero. He can put a curse on you, that lad. Got it in for me after I took a few drinks too many during Saturnalia. Gods! For two months everything I did turned out rotten."

"I'll remember."

"And remember too, he's called the Lord Helios nowadays. An *excellency*, if you please."

"Lord Helios, my noble eunuch!" El Kedar made a sweeping wave to the doorkeeper, who returned this with an effeminate bow. Shaking in the night air, or prey to her own fears, Lysandra watched them without seeing anything funny in their dumbshow. Another person likewise found no humor in what he saw and heard. She was startled to hear an icy voice

behind her on the Portico call out to the men on the grass below:

"You are late, Syrian. The Lady Ancaris tells me you were expected yesterday and then again this morning."

For the first time Lysandra saw that El Kedar was afraid, and she was delighted. Curious to see what friend of Ancaris had affected him in this way, she looked up at the white-clad figure standing half in and half out of shadow among the columns above.

The jovial gatekeeper, caught in the middle of his bow, straightened rapidly, nudging El Kedar, who saluted the figure on the portico in haste.

"My Lord Helios, I was delayed by a friend of the emperor's, Salvius Otho."

The man on the portico said, "Bring your merchandise to me." The voice was soft, silvery, and cold as silver. El Kedar and the gatekeeper had been mimicking this man, Helios. The eunuch must be formidable, for they were terrified.

"Yes, my Lord Helios. Bring her up to the portico, Sekmit, and quickly!"

Though Lysandra had seen a eunuch occasionally in Massilia, those she noticed at all were grossly fat and she supposed their thwarted sex drive had been satisfied by a passion for food. She had never seen a eunuch who was not well dressed and a man of some money, with a patron who paid well.

Wealth and power were the only similarities she could find between other castrated males and the man who moved through the moonlight and shadows of the portico columns to look her over.

He was the most beautiful creature she had ever seen. Tall, slender, all in white, even to the belt of his ankle-length robe, he deserved the name Helios; he was handsome as the sun god. His vivid blue eyes and thick auburn hair gave him dazzling if feminine good looks. In spite of the beauty of his eyes, however, there seemed to be a chilling, hypnotic quality about them as he studied her while El Kedar threw back the palla that covered her.

Splendid as he looked, this Palatine sun god, his pale flesh was as cold as his eyes, with the hardness of marble when he touched her. A strange creature, far too impersonal to be called a man. But what a waste of good material, with the voluptuous curve of his lips, the perfect, elegantly shaped

nose, and the column of his throat, all of which might well have been the model for his divine namesake!

Because she was afraid and suspicious of everything that night, Lysandra dreaded to fall into the power of this inhuman creature who was a friend of the Lady Ancaris. But as he snapped his fingers toward the end of the portico where two doors opened inward to the labyrinth of the palace, Lysandra reminded herself that at least the eunuch would not be sexually interested in her. It was a satisfaction of sorts. She almost smiled, thinking of how disappointed Daphne would have been.

Bowing all the way, El Kedar led Sekmit and Lysandra to the open doors where the Lord Helios dismissed him indifferently.

"But excellency, my payment," the slave dealer protested, almost squealing in his panic.

"You may collect tomorrow. Or you may not. I will examine your merchandise. Leave the rest of it with the gatekeeper."

"The . . . rest?"

"All the goods in that wagon. Smuggled in, I've no doubt. Leave that as well."

"Oh, but excellency, no more than an amphora of poor wine for my own table. Nothing of any consequence. Why, I've never dealt with smugglers in my life! I swear it, by Moloch!"

"A poor god to swear by. The only things your precious Moloch understands are pirates and smuggled goods. Leave the wagon."

"But—"

"Leave it." The command was soft-spoken but there was bite in it.

The gatekeeper took El Kedar's elbow, urging him off the portico. Sekmit, looking puzzled, removed the hemp cord from Lysandra's wrist and grunted something to his master, who shook his head. The two went out the gates, leaving the wagon, the horses, and the load itself behind.

"See that the wagon is unloaded and look to the animals," Helios ordered the gatekeeper, who jumped to obey, puffing and breathing hard.

Lysandra wondered what would happen if she suddenly turned and ran, but in the doorway two Nubian slaves had watched impassively and now, following the snap of Helios' fingers, they formed a bodyguard, one on either side of her.

She was forced to walk in front of Helios through a narrow, ill-lighted passage.

If this was a section of the palace, these were curious headquarters for the emperors of Rome, she thought. She had expected something much grander, more like the description of Nero's new Golden House. Here she sometimes found the torches so far apart she could hardly see her way. No such problem affected the Nubians, who plodded on, turned to the right, avoiding a larger, better lighted corridor, and finally came to a halt in front of a heavy, undecorated door that would have disgraced those Lysandra had seen on the docks in the Massilia customs house. The corridor itself was dingy and gloomy, smelling of urine and other foulness. The lighting was so bad she marveled that a man of Helios' apparent power should center that power in such a place. Unless, of course, these were the cells for slaves awaiting the marketplace.

Helios unlocked the door, which further puzzled her. Judging by the exterior, it hardly seemed worth the effort of turning the heavy key. Helios stepped inside and snapped his fingers in the way that was rapidly beginning to prey on her nerves. After a glance to see that the two Nubians stood behind her and there was still no way out, she obeyed the snap of the eunuch's fingers. Her only possible revenge was in her slow movements, the cold dignity with which she walked into the room.

He closed the door behind her, bolting it. The grating sound made her jump. Her flesh seemed to creep. She had no idea what to expect.

Two or three seconds after looking around, she cried out, more astonished than terrified. The room itself, while not as large as the governor's quarters in small, faraway Lutetia, was a bizarre monument to purity. Or so it appeared. The portieres shutting out the night air at the window embrasure were of a heavily lined white wool threaded with silver. Matching materials covered the couch, whose scrolled head- and footboards were stark ebony and silver.

The floor was a black-and-white mosaic whose patterns were partially hidden under a long table at which an attenuated old man was seated, copying the contents of a wax tablet onto a larger papyrus scroll. Wicks floating in oil provided a smoky but adequate light. The old man looked up, his rheumy gaze fixed on Lysandra.

Her minutes of astonished survey had lulled Lysandra into

forgetting her own danger. She was brought back to the grim present by the eunuch, Helios, who gave her a sharp push in the small of her back.

"Let Elim look you over. Faster, girl!"

She bitterly resented the indignity of it all. She sometimes thought it was this she hated more than anything else about her new status. In spite of the push, which caused her to stumble, she managed to walk haughtily across the Persian rug and the black-and-white mosaic of Apollo and his sun chariot on the floor.

The aged man, Elim, dropped his stylus and looked her over as, she had no doubt, Helios was examining her from the back. The old man sucked his few remaining teeth. His moist, red-rimmed eyes held a little spark that showed he was still a male.

"Crimson and green? Atrocious!" Who designed this monstrosity of a gown?" His clawed hand snatched away the gauze scarf she had used to cover the naked right breast of a public prostitute. She felt his nails scratch the tender skin and flinched. Helios too objected, but from aesthetic reasons as he examined her flesh.

"Elim, watch those nails! She must be as perfect as possible. Look here at her thigh." He jerked her skirt up to her hip, pointing to the long healing scratch from her earlier battle on the bireme. She tried to force his fingers off, but in spite of his fragile appearance, the eunuch was surprisingly strong and slapped her own hand away. "Some more of that idiot Kedar's work. The damned fool will not understand that women like this are much more desirable without such signs of common use."

She swallowed her pride long enough to say in a ragged voice, "He didn't . . . lie with me. The scratch was an accident."

"That's one bit of good fortune. The gods only know we don't want any of his harlots in service on the Palatine."

He untied her gown at the left shoulder and let it fall to the floor, ignoring her gasp. Though the room was almost uncomfortably warm, he felt her shiver as his slow, careful fingers examined her. In a voice that was like melting ice, soft but freezing, he warned her, "No orgasms, please. I have no intention of obliging you."

She snapped. "Your hands are cold. And I was not always a slave."

He seemed to approve of her haughty answer. "So I have been told." But he pretended not to hear Elim's sly dig:

"Nor could you oblige even if you had intentions, eh, Helios? How about selling her to me? Have you ever seen skin like that? Deep gold, and the hair, black as ebony."

She grew more and more unnerved under the eunuch's inspection. Shame made her blush even though the probing hands of the eunuch were as impersonal as those of the Greek physician when she was twelve.

Afterward, he picked up the green gown and said, "Put it on." She dressed under his speculative gaze, keeping one hand over her bared flesh.

He said finally, "You are not a virgin, of course. And something must be done about that prudishness of yours. Physically, you are more than ready. But you are behaving like a child of ten. False modesty is an expensive fault in a woman whose body was so well fashioned for its purpose. What must we do to cure that modesty?"

Her mouth was dry. She stammered, "I'm n-not like that. I'm not . . . ready."

"The Lady Ancaris assured me that when you were a free woman, before your father's crime, you were a practiced courtesan."

"It's a lie," she burst out. "Why does she hate me so? She wronged my father, cheated the Roman state—why does she still want to torture me?"

"Interesting." He folded his arms, considering her but obviously thinking of other matters. "How did she cheat the Roman state?" He held up one hand. "I know all about these dealings between your father and the Bargemen's Guild. I understand from the Lady Ancaris that you made some wild accusations, saying she had induced your father to commit the crime."

"It was more than an accusation, my lord. It was the truth." She forgot such small matters as outraged modesty and caught his hand in both of hers. "The gods be my witness! She wrote some of my father's accounts and he recopied them. She told him how to make a private fortune through payments made to the legion at Colonia Agrippina on the Rhine. I don't quite understand it, but it's true. I swear it!"

Elim startled Lysandra by a sudden chuckling comment. "Sounds just like sweet Ancaris. The question is, how would it help her dear little brother Domitian? Ancaris isn't going to lift a finger without helping baby brother. I'll wager she

wants this beauty for Domitian. If she keeps Domitian busy with harlots, he won't turn to someone respectable for his 'motherly advice.' He'll remain under the thumb of big sister Ancaris. Sound logical to you?"

Helios grunted. Elim cackled and probed the matter again. "I'd give a thousand gold auriae to see what happened if this pretty harlot outsmarted Ancaris and got baby brother for herself. Too bad I can't get the girl ready. If I was ten years younger!"

"Only ten?" Helios asked, and then turned back to Lysandra, pursuing the matter that interested him. "Is there any proof of Ancaris' participation in your father's crimes? Think, girl! Any proof at all?"

A tiny flicker of hope was lighted in Lysandra's heart. The old man believed the truth, and the eunuch too seemed eager for proofs against his friend and patroness, the Lady Ancaris.

"There may have been proofs, my lord." She gave him the title hoping to win his favor. "But naturally, they were destroyed by her husband, or someone."

"What? General Max?" Helios gave the old man a look. "What a bit of luck, if Max is mixed up in something!"

Lysandra said, "I don't understand."

"Nor need you, if you are wise, girl. Back to present matters. Let me see your teeth. Open your mouth, Sandra."

"My name is Lysandra, daughter of Perseus. My mother's father was a Gallic chieftain."

"You are Sandra now. Your past no longer exists." He walked around her, came back to face her, finding fault with her curves. "There would be more elegance if the breasts and the hips were not so . . ."

"Enticing?" put in Elim mischievously.

"Noticeable. The waist is tiny. That should help. Teeth?" He forced two fingers between her lips, opening her mouth in spite of her stubborn efforts. He sounded like a man reading off a list: "Teeth excellent. No signs of disease. Yes. You'll do. The Lady Ancaris seems set on purchasing you. Can't do it, of course, until the emperor's household has passed on the matter." He smiled for the first time, such a sweet smile, palpably false. "The Lady Acté is at her villa in the Campania south of Rome. So at present, I am the highest-ranking member of the household on the Palatine. Look upon me as your master, Sandra, and we'll do very well between us. But show that stubborn streak of yours to someone else. You understand me?"

"I understand."

"Master."

She looked bewildered, and her eyes seemed to grow larger as they followed his movements. Very slowly, he removed his belt of braided white leather. The tips were silver with unfinished edges. They looked sharp. Still calm, undisturbed, he ran the leather and the silver tips through his slim fingers. He said quietly, "*Yes, master.*"

As she made no reply he raised the belt and the silver tips and struck stingingly across the bare flesh below her throat.

"How do you address me?"

Tears of pain and outrage blinded her momentarily in spite of her effort not to reveal any feelings. He was not so different from Daphne's new master, after all. She despised the cringing instinct within her that made her open her dry lips and whisper hoarsely, "*Yes, master.*"

"Excellent. You learn after a time." He tied his belt again about his waist and reminded her, "I don't like scars and I don't like violence. But also, Sandra, I expect to be obeyed. The Nubians will take you to a cubicle where you may sleep until I decide how you may best be taught to serve on the Palatine."

Elim rattled the papyrus roll. "You're safe leaving her to me, Helios. You don't want complications appearing, and I'm not likely to give her any. But at my age, think what I can teach her! I've served under Caligula, Claudius, and Nero."

"Be quiet, Elim. You gossip too much. One day it may cost you your head." Perhaps he was also aware that Lysandra had heard Elim's indiscreet remarks. He said quickly, "Come along, Sandra. That's my good, docile girl."

She loathed him, more for mentioning her docility than for striking her. She scarcely felt the burn of the whip's edges across her breast, but she seethed with hatred toward the inhuman creature. Still, there was nothing for her to do at this minute except obey him, with docility.

Elim rang for the two Nubians, and within a minute they were at the door. Helios gave Lysandra into their charge. "Take her to the room formerly used by the Parthian captive. The one who called herself a princess."

One of the slaves nodded. The other simply looked at Lysandra without expression. He must have been through this many times before, she thought. She was about to leave with them when Helios called to her, "Sandra."

She turned and he waited. She thought his eyes gleamed. She asked with difficulty, "Yes—master?"

"Goodnight, Sandra. You may go far in Rome, as long as you remember—what?"

She drew herself up, spat out her bitter admission: "I am your slave, master!"

She heard his soft laughter long after she and the Nubians were on their way through the lower halls. The labyrinthine palace had been rebuilt with additions of clashing styles by each of the four emperors since Augustus.

They climbed a narrow staircase leading straight upward without a turn. On the next floor above they took her to a small room like most Roman bedchambers, with a narrow, barred window, a leather curtain, a narrow bed with a scroll top similar to that in the eunuch's apartment, a low tabaret, and an oak chest on the floor. Was the chest meant to hold all Lysandra's possessions? At the moment she had none.

Each of the Nubian pair took one of her arms. She began to struggle, thinking they meant to assault her. She flattered herself. They merely threw her onto the rug in the middle of the room and abruptly shut the door. She scrambled up and hurried to pull the door open. It was bolted from the hall.

For a few minutes she lost her reason. She hammered on the door with her fists and cried hysterically. This produced nothing but skinned hands and a choking sensation. No one seemed to hear her. Nor would they have cared if they had, she thought. The ravishers of her world were outside that door. Inside, she was briefly, blessedly alone.

Still engulfed by despair, she considered suicide. She might strangle herself by the cords of the coin belt she wore. But would anyone suffer afterward for what had been done to her father and to herself? To achieve revenge she must remain alive. Healthy. Neither mad nor weak.

Some time later she dragged her way across the floor of the little room and dropped down on the typically hard Roman couch. Still in the gown that advertised her salable assets like any other merchandise, she eventually slept.

Her spirits seemed to lift with her dreams, and she knew the world must look better by daylight. She would borrow Daphne's pragmatic philosophy and survive to pay them all back. Afterward, somewhere, she might even know happiness. It had happened to others.

Survival and adaptability were the secrets.

Chapter Nine

She awoke in golden sunlight to find a pair of lively black eyes staring at her with great interest. She sat straight up, discovering the eyes belonged to the triangular face of a boy about twelve with a wide mouth and a winning ugliness.

Scrambling to cover herself with the couch cover, she was amused when the boy said in a very sophisticated way, "You musn't mind being undressed in front of me, Sandra. I see lots of naked females. Sometimes I help them bathe and dress. That's why I'm here. To help you."

"Well, I'm not used to little boys helping me. Isn't there a female slave?"

He had been kneeling with one bare, scratched knee on the couch. He backed off now, not hurt but puzzled.

"Claudia Acté put me here on the Palatine. It was that or training for the arena, and my muscles weren't big enough." He demonstrated by flexing what appeared to be the bones of his scrawny upper arm. Lysandra laughed.

"Quite true. And you are right about my bathing. If you will take me there."

"But you must eat first. Here's bread and honey. Baked before sunrise. The bread, I mean."

She thanked him, said she wasn't hungry but changed her mind when she smelled the fresh-baked round loaf. She hadn't eaten since the sixth hour yesterday, and much had happened since then. She broke off pieces of the still-warm loaf. She dipped them in honey. The taste was delicious, reviving and strengthening her.

Afterward, the boy, who called himself Theron, offered her a hand. She got up, trying to smooth the wrinkled silk gown into a presentable covering.

He grabbed up a handful of deep-violet material, in softest wool, much finer than she was used to.

"It's a nice dress. They cleaned it. It fastens on only one

shoulder, but it covers both sides of your chest, so you won't take cold. Look at the goose bumps on you."

"Never mind the goose bumps. Take me to that bath you promised me."

He was as good as his word. Still carrying the pile of dark-violet wool he led the way into a spacious hall lined at intervals by tall torchères with hanging lamps. Between them were panels of wall paintings depicting half-naked goddesses at play.

The previous night Lysandra might have resented the wall paintings in spite of their cheerful beauty. Today, in the sunlight that poured through various embrasures along with brisk March air, she found the paintings artistic and the subjects logical. She was stimulated by the cool breeze, and by bright young Theron, who raised her spirits enormously. His friendly attitude made her wonder if escape might still be possible.

On a light, confidential note she asked the boy, "how do you find your way around here? I don't suppose you ever go outside, do you?"

"Who, me?" he scoffed. "I never stay up here in this fancy place all day. I like the Circus Maximus. It's all along the west side of the Palatine, where they have the chariot races. I bet on the Green, like the emperor does. These others in the palace, they bet on the Blue. It's the rich man's team. Me, I like the Green."

"Yes, but is it easy to get there?"

"Easy for me. They sell sausage and chick-peas in the arcades. All greasy and good. And I like the Subura. That's the other way. A street where bad people live and kill people. And poor people cook a lot there. It smells most as good as the arcades."

"I can imagine. But how do you find your way out of these endless corridors? You must be very clever."

Theron waved away such mundane problems. "I could get out of here with my eyes closed. Besides, none of the guards would stop me. They know I come back."

"You aren't a—*a slave*?" She had never thought seriously about the word. Its real meaning had become clear on the journey through Gaul. It was only last night, when its degradation was branded across the tip of her breast with a leather belt, that she found the word itself obscene.

"I'm Acté's slave. She bought me when she was in Greece with the emperor two years ago. She's going back right soon."

She might take me. Look at this. Isn't it the grandest thing you ever saw?"

She was impressed. The baths for the imperial household, while smaller than the many great baths in the city, looked like havens of refuge. No imperial pressures here in the great central pool where dozens of palace slaves and freedman employees splashed about or played various ball games across the blue waters. Business was discussed in luxury beside the pools or in satin-and-velvet-hung alcoves, amid much laughter and, Lysandra had no doubt, the passing of bribes.

"Females are in the pool beyond the frigidarium," Theron explained, pronouncing the word "frigidarium" very carefully. Other rooms for hot baths, cold baths, massages, and sports as simple as three-cornered ball games opened off the main rectangular pool.

Lysandra hesitated before following the boy along the elegant marble length of the pool. She was so anxious she forgot caution.

"Theron, tell me, please. What is the quickest way out of here?"

He was bewildered. "The way we came in. Over there."

"No. I mean the way out of the palace and down the Palatine Hill."

He waved aside this idiocy. "Nobody'd want to do that. Not till they had their bath. Here's the bath for ladies."

"No. After the bath," she persisted desperately, hanging back. She had a vague idea that if she made her way through the endless passages and down whatever staircase appeared in her way, she must finally reach the dingy corridor outside Helios' sybaritic apartment. If she moved fast she might get out to the portico where she had first seen the eunuch. From there it wouldn't be too difficult to make her way down the wide east steps of the Palatine. She could then lose herself in the heart of the Old Forum. She had seen maps of Rome often enough. She wasn't sure how she would survive, but she could read and write well. Her printing was almost as good as her father's had been, and she might be employed as a copyist for some manuscript publisher.

Anything was better than remaining the property of Helios and the Palatine. Nor was she swayed by these luxurious private baths for those who worked and lived in the imperial household.

Already, young Theron was presenting "Sandra, the Gallic princess" to an aging masseuse, a tough, muscular woman

from the Danube region. If Lysandra had any lingering notion of seeking help or sympathy from her fellow slaves, she soon banished that idea. The masseuse considered her remarkably fortunate to be imperial property.

Other women surrounded Lysandra, gaily stripped her, and sent her into the women's pool, where her body was soothed in minutes and she returned to some of her optimism as she swam, finding most of the other women friendly if inordinately curious about her. They were all naked, and a few of them were built like Ancaris, Helios' ideal, reed-flat. But most of the women were flabby-breasted, with prominent bellies and wide hips. She suspected they did very little work, perhaps not even in bed. Lysandra had always heard that there were ten slaves for every one task in Rome and the average working period of a house slave was one to two hours a day.

Young Theron only fed their curiosity by repeating his story that she was a Gallic princess and being reserved for a special fate.

When Lysandra had gone through the caldarium, turning her red as if she blushed all over, then the frigidarium, which turned her flesh blue, she fell into the hands of the masseuse, who kneaded and pulled and pushed at Lysandra's body. It was a thorough job, and in other circumstances Lysandra might have enjoyed this return to the supple, limber body she had enjoyed before the assault by the Roman soldier in Gaul.

The masseuse agreed with Theron that Sandra was the luckiest woman on the Palatine at the moment. "There's a story going around. You might be reserved for the emperor himself."

"What is he like?"

"Kind. When he's in the mood. He has a quick temper. That's when you've got to watch out. He's vain. Too used to praise." The masseuse pushed her off the table in a friendly fashion. "But remember. He can be loyal. And he's generous. Just don't cross him. And by the gods! Never let yourself be bored at his recitations, public or private."

"I'll keep it in mind," Lysandra promised, hoping she would never have occasion to do so.

Lysandra was oiled, dried, and perfumed. Two women then told her to step into the deep-violet skirt of her gown. Clenching her teeth, she saw that there was no mistaking the vulgarity of the clothes she must wear since her fall into the pit of slavery. Unlike the green gown which left her bosom only half-covered, this left her stomach and abdomen bare.

The skirt began at her hips and fell in graceful folds to the floor. The bodice, though brief enough to have horrified her in past times, covered both breasts, leaving one shoulder bare. The women fastened the belt of silver coins below her navel and let the heavy chain of coins fall against her legs, giving her movements a sensuous sway.

"They think of everything," she said as her hair was brushed to a lustrous black sheen.

"They certainly do," one of the women agreed, entirely missing the irony in her voice. It was ominous to Lysandra that these women showed no jealousy over her apparent connection with the emperor. When Theron came back to escort her through other bath chambers she questioned him about it the minute they came to a deserted alcove.

"Someone is spending a great deal of time and money on me. I should think those women would resent me. But they don't. Is it because they think the emperor might like me?"

"Oh, no. They don't think you'll get to the emperor. The Lady Ancaris and Helios want to interest her young brother Domitian in females."

"What? Am I to satisfy boys now?"

He grinned and shrugged his bony shoulders. "He's called handsome. He's almost seventeen. That's pretty old. And Lord Helios says—"

"Is this Lord Helios so powerful?"

"He wasn't," the boy said wisely. "Till he got to be friends with General Vespasian's daughter, Ancaris, and her little brother. That's why we're going through the baths this way instead of how we came in. Lady Ancaris wants her brother to see you."

Her nervousness increased. "You aren't going to leave me there, with this Domitian?"

"No. Most likely he'll say he doesn't want you. He studies a lot, and he has all kinds of books and things he reads. That's because Lady Ancaris thinks he might be the new Caesar someday. I heard her tell the eunuch. But it all depends on her father, Vespasian, the great general. He has to be emperor before Domitian can be one. And Vespasian's loyal to Nero, so Domitian would have to wait a long time. But a female could make Domitian more popular with the mobs. Lady Ancaris worries. She thinks if he doesn't have girls like you, he's liable to get married. Then he won't listen to his sister anymore."

Lysandra decided the more she learned about her Roman enemies, the better prepared she would be to save herself.

"I haven't heard much about this Domitian. I know that his older brother, Titus, is the comrade of General Max." She cleared her throat, which tightened as always when she thought of the man who had made her believe in his promises, and then betrayed her. "And Vespasian thinks so much of this elder brother, Titus, I suppose young Domitian is jealous."

"But he's born legal, just like Titus. Their sister, the Lady Ancaris, had a harlot for a mother."

Lysandra winced at the word on such childish lips but was passionately interested in the relationship between Ancaris and Maximian.

"Surely she must love her husband."

With the ease of an insider, Theron dismissed this naive notion. "Old Vespasian thought that one up—joining her to his best soldier. General Max comes from the Claudian House. Her being his wife makes her a Claudian too. But everybody says they hate each other. It's her little brother Domitian she loves like she was his mother. He's been in Rome since before Saturnalia, and he watches and studies everything they do on the Palatine. He wants to be emperor someday, you see."

"More than he will want a woman like me." If the worst came to the worst, Lysandra thought, she might make something of this knowledge.

What a lot Theron's young ears heard! And almost all of it was deadly gossip. Keenly aware of his danger, she said, "I should never have made you repeat all this, Theron. It could be dangerous. Don't say it to anyone else. Promise me."

"But that's how I hear it. From everybody."

"Nevertheless, let's change the subject. Suppose you want to visit the Subura. How do you get out of the palace?" She had no interest in the slum district, but at least it was beyond the confines of the Palatine Hill.

"Back through the baths, the way we came." He started into a large double chamber with the walls lined by scrolls and tablets on one side of a shallow pool full of lampreys. He motioned her to follow him along the edge of the pool, which was open to the sunny sky. For a minute she thought the tablinum across the pool was empty.

She prompted Theron, "The way we came. And then?"

He lowered his voice but went on easily, "Then I go up the

steps and across a big chamber where it's slippery and there's pictures on the floor. Then there's the porch and the wide steps and down the hill. Why?"

"It seems very complicated. I should think you'd leave more easily from this direction. The back of the Palatine, and down through the circus some way." It certainly seemed handier from their present place in the palace.

She was silenced by the sudden movement across the pool. They were not alone after all. A slim young man her own age slipped out of the shadows beside a wall partitioned for endless papyrus cylinders with their placemark tabs hanging in bright patterns. The youth carried a scroll under his arm and held a wax tablet open in his other hand. An unusually studious youth, so much so that Lysandra knew he must be the Lady Ancaris' beloved younger brother, Domitian.

The youth scowled, his narrow black brows forming wings in his pale forehead. He called across the pool, "What do you want here? These are imperial apartments."

Since he was not a member of Nero's imperial family, it took nerve to order them out of the room. Lysandra said quickly, "Theron, it would be easier to leave by the west doors, don't you think?"

Theron was surprised. Plainly, he had expected to spend more time in this room. He rubbed the palms of his hands on his tunic, and leaning over the pool as if to confide in the young man, he informed him, "But this is the female. Like the Lady Ancaris said. I was supposed to bring her, excellency."

"I don't need a female," Domitian insisted, with a touch of righteousness. "The empire is falling around our ears and you give me females."

In other circumstances, Lysandra's vanity might have been wounded, but she was delighted to walk on with dignity toward the west doors of the room. Nor was she flattered when the Roman's voice stopped her just as her hand was on the heavy brass door latch.

"Well, let me look at you. Gods, what a waste of time women are when there's work to do! Walk back to me. On my side of the pool."

She no longer had any sexual fear of Domitian. He was slender, dark-eyed, dark-haired, with no ugly blemishes, but she saw only a youth astonishingly her own age, intelligent, yet petulant and spoiled. His actions made him seem at least ten years her junior.

She turned and moved slowly at her own pace around the end of the pool and toward Domitian. The heavy chain of coins swung between her long limbs as she moved and made her skirts sway beguilingly. She became aware too late that she had defeated her purpose. His gaze was fixed on her skirts and the undulating chain of coins. He remained stationary, however, watching her, still holding the papyrus and the wax tablet.

Theron called out, his voice loud and sharp in the silence, "Shall we go, Sandra and I?"

"You may go." Domitian recovered from his curious little paralysis. "The slave woman will remain for the moment. I want to see precisely why my sister sent her to me. I confess, I don't share her ideas of women's beauty. Still—you may go, boy."

"No!" Lysandra swung around, conscious that she was now separated from her young guide by the pool itself. "Theron, you said you would stay."

The boy was conscious of an affront to his honor. "They told me to stay, excellency. I can't go."

Domitian seemed taken aback at this refusal. Observing him carefully, Lysandra suspected he was new to power and not sure how much or how little he had. Even his right to share this library in the palace was based on the loyalty of his father toward Nero. Domitian tried to have it both ways without losing face. He was sulky but no longer commanding, and the sullen resentment in his black eyes was gone.

"I want to see if the woman has any sense. You may wait in the garden. And don't spy on me, as you usually do."

Dragging his feet, and with a shrug at Lysandra, Theron went on to the big west doors, pulled one open, and slipped through. In a panic Lysandra started after him, but something unexpected in Domitian's voice, a plaintive, wistful note, stopped her.

"They said I should at least talk to you." She stared at him. "They said I should make love to you, force you." He moved toward her with the scroll and the tablet. He raised them in a helpless gesture.

"Are you afraid I'll hurt you? How can I? My hands are full. And besides, I don't need to assault women. They come to me if they wish. And they always do." The shadow of a deep-rooted, suspicious nature darkened his face. He added, "Though that's not love, of course."

He was in front of her now and motioned with the tablet

toward a couch beside the pool. His curiously troubled eyes searched hers. "You musn't tell my sister. I let her think I've no interest in women. Then she encourages me."

"But why, excellency?" As she grew less afraid of him, she found him pathetic, and she was quite sure why Ancaris had told him to attack her. Lysandra would then have hated him automatically. Ancaris wanted no women around him who were genuine in their feelings. She sat on the edge of the couch. When he dropped down beside her she drew away from him automatically. The movement once more touched the deep insecurity within him. He remained stiffly on his side of the couch.

"Do I repulse you?"

"Certainly not, excellency. But why must you hide your natural interest in women from your sister?"

He answered as she had guessed. "Because Ancaris is jealous. She is afraid I'll marry, or find a patrician mistress, and then she won't rule beside me when I'm emperor. So she offers me only prostitutes and slaves. And never blondes."

Lysandra began to see. She could imagine the tensile strength in the golden Ancaris who pictured herself as unofficial empress of Rome at some future date.

Studying him at this close range, she found him a curious combination of brooding jealousy and ambition, plus a sensuality he struggled to hide. He made some further remarks about blondes, whom he apparently coveted, and reached toward her. His fingers passed lightly across her bare abdomen, and she forced herself to remain unmoved. She didn't want to arouse emotions in him, not even anger. But he raised his hand instead to touch her hair.

"You aren't like most of the women Ancaris sends me. They giggle and pretend to love me, but it's as if they were acting in the Theater of Marcellus. She never sends me any woman who really cares. Maybe that's why she sent you. You probably hate me. Do you?"

"I don't know, excellency. How can I hate you? Or love you?"

He nodded. "But you tell the truth. Straight out. You're different. I'll wager Ancaris doesn't know you're like this."

She tried to keep this curious conversation light. "And your sister won't send blondes to you? So you choose them yourself?"

He was pleased at her understanding. "I outsmart her. I had a little blonde yesterday. We made love in the pool." He

saw her startled glance at the lazy swimming fish and corrected her impression. "In the big pool. The main baths. I'm very good at making love under water."

"I'm sure you are. And women must find you especially attractive because you need not use force."

He had taken a length of her hair and stroked it, examining it intently. "I wonder. Have you ever thought about dyeing your hair yellow?"

"Never. If I did, your sister wouldn't like it."

"True." He sighed. "But you are still imperial property, and nobody can buy you until Nero gives the word. It's a pity. You don't seem half as stupid as most women I make love to. If only you were blonde."

The tablet dropped with a clatter as he caressed the crown of her head. She jumped nervously, but he paid no attention to the sound of the wooden frame of the tablet as it hit the pool's edge.

"But I'm not a blonde. I can never be one. May I go now? The boy is expecting me." She heard an authoritative voice in the east alcove and hoped it would prove to be a visitor for Domitian. She could then leave with very little ceremony, by the west door. Since Theron waited there, she thought it highly probable that by this time she could persuade him to show her the simpler way to escape from this labyrinth.

Domitian's visitor was a soldier. She heard the ring of his boots on the alcove floor. Taking a chance, she tried to stand, but Domitian hadn't let go of her hair, and she cried out, falling back onto the couch. He begged her pardon, let her go. Having fallen on one hip, she flailed the air trying to regain her balance. With her hair tumbling messily around her face, she was glad of Domitian's help as he pulled her upright, apologizing again.

Too late. The visitor was at the end of the pool, physically putting aside the doorkeeper who argued, "But excellency, the Lord Domitian is in conference. He cannot be disturbed."

"So I see! A conference with one of his secret advisers, no doubt. We need him in the field, not in bed."

Through the curtain of her tousled hair, Lysandra looked up. She knew that voice. Over the barrier of Domitian's arm, which she had caught when she was trying to get to her feet, she made out the gleam of a military cuirass and plumed helmet. Although the general was dust-covered, his face sunburned and scowling, she could never forget the tall, muscular figure of Lucius Maximian Claudius. General Max.

Her emotions were wildly mixed. The first breathtaking second or two of relief and joy was succeeded by a fierce bitterness, to which General Max added as he snapped his opinion to Domitian from the far end of the pool.

"Your brother Titus needs you, and I need you. We are outnumbered throughout Syria. And where is your command? Scattered over southern Italy, so you can play at emperor."

Domitian leaped to his feet, frantically thrusting Lysandra away from him.

"It's a lie! Father took my command. He said I was too young. Don't you think I want to fight beside you and Titus? Max! Give me a command. I'll be loyal. To the death."

Maximian's tired features relaxed and he smiled. He looked almost like the handsome, unforgotten hero of Lysandra's first days in Lutetia, until he spoke.

"I hope it won't go that far. Well, I didn't retrace my steps around half of the Mediterranean in record time just to return empty-handed. Report to the barracks at the ninth hour. Now, my man"—he caught the twittering doorkeeper's sleeve—"you may escort me out."

Domitian called to him, all his enthusiasm fading, "But my sister says I musn't leave Rome. She says there are three secret plots against the emperor and I should be here to protect Father's rights."

General Max said firmly, "Ancaris isn't the empress yet. And your father has no intention of stealing the throne from the man he serves." He had taken several steps, but added over his shoulder, "And—Domitian?"

"Yes, Max."

"You'll have no time for your secret whores. So get rid of that one. . . . Meet you at the ninth hour."

Lysandra stood up to her full height, brushing back her hair with hands that shook under the force of her rage. Her proud effort was wasted.

General Max didn't look back again.

Chapter Ten

Neither Domitian nor the doorkeeper made any effort to stop Lysandra as she walked to the west doors. Domitian was already rushing in the opposite direction, anxious to get into battle, and perhaps show his skill over that of his elder brother Titus.

Lysandra's mind was in turmoil. She was beyond weeping. One fact had been uppermost in her mind during the wretched weeks since Lutetia. At least she would have the burning satisfaction of witnessing Maximian's shame when they met again.

Now he had seen her and not even recognized her. For a few minutes her pride was gone. Neither her bitterness nor the hatred could destroy the shame she felt as she left the tablinum. She looked like what she was. And Maximian had made her into this creature.

On the other side of the door, Theron caught her hand. The sunlight on the west portico revived her spirits. Theron was his usual frank and lively self.

"You look sunburned. You're real pink."

She ignored this. Her thoughts coalesced on the most crucial matter, her escape. They were walking along the semicircular portico where, a few hours later, they might have seen, far below them, the first of the day's great chariot races run before two hundred and fifty thousand wild, yelling devotees and gamblers. Theron explained this, but its only significance for Lysandra was the fact that it might have been easier for her to elude her pert little prison guard if the races were being run at this moment.

Theron would be punished if she escaped. No way around that. It required thinking.

"Did you like the Lady Ancaris' brother?" he asked casually but with a side glance to see her reaction.

"He was more courteous than the soldier who came clattering in. That disgusting General Max!"

She knew then that he had seen the whole thing, and possibly heard it as well. His eyes danced. "He's a soldier, that General Max. But even General Max won't make a soldier out of the Lord Domitian."

"Is he a coward then?"

"Nothing like that. He's just one for books, and maybe running countries. He tells you better how to do things than when he does them himself."

She thought this was a sharp observation, and it only raised the boy in her regard. But how to get rid of him without making him suffer for it?

It would be necessary to cover this ridiculous slave gown first. She hugged her bare arms, and true to his generous nature, Theron noticed.

"You're cold again. I'll get you a cloak. They won't like it if you get sick. You're worth lots of money, Helios says." He scratched his unruly head. "Helios and the Lady Ancaris don't want Claudia Acté to get ahold of you. Do you know why?"

"Because Lady Acté is out of town, I suppose."

"But Acté would be good to you. She's like that."

He started back into the palace through the big doors at the end of the portico.

She hesitated, wondering if she could outrun him from this point, climb over the low wall of the portico and make her way down through the steep rows of seats above the sandy course of the racing circus. But she would have to wear a cloak. This violet gown was far too conspicuous everywhere except in the palace or an expensive brothel.

"Is there a cloak I may borrow somewhere near here?" she asked; without much hope of any result.

"Sure. Right near. On this side of the big hall. Acté's room. I can get in any time."

She was surprised and oddly disappointed. "Do you often get in at any time, without permission?"

Instead of showing either shame or impudence, he seemed puzzled by her ignorance of what was apparently well known throughout the many palace additions.

"Acté never locks anything. Everybody knows she'll give them what they need. She's funny that way."

"She must be." The so-called goodness of Nero's confidante and former mistress left Lysandra unimpressed. There must be more to it, reasons the boy knew nothing about.

But sure enough, Theron calmly entered a little room off

one of the great halls opening into an audience chamber impressively lined with veined brown marble pillars and a gallery over the colonnade. By comparison, Claudia Acté's sleeping chamber was more spartan than the room in which Lysandra had awakened that morning.

One piece of furniture alone was worth a great deal of money. Lysandra ran her fingers over the little tabaret in the middle of the room. The tabletop was a curious mosaic design in black on white, an oblique, almond-shaped figure that looked like something vaguely familiar.

"What is it?"

Theron had gone to the back wall, where several garments hung from pegs. He took one down before answering. "A fish. It's Acté's religion. People say she worships it. That's why she's—well, the way she is."

Lysandra had never heard of such an absurd religion. By comparison, the old Druid personification of trees, rocks, and stones was positively sensible.

"What is so special about fish? Doesn't she eat them?"

"Oh, yes. Many times. But this has something to do with Greek words. She worships a god the Jews worship. You know Jews. We have lots of them in Rome. There was a kind of priest over in King Agrippa's country that was killed for treason and his name and what they called him—a king, I think—spells out a word in Greek."

"A word meaning 'fish.' So she worships a fish." The woman must be mad! No wonder she gave away her possessions and was so pure and unselfish.

For the first time Lysandra had angered the boy.

"It's not like that. She worships what the word for 'fish' spells out in Greek. That's what she said." He added lamely, "I never knew what she meant. But she's my friend."

Ashamed of her cruel scoffing at the woman who had done so much for the boy, Lysandra raised her fingertips from the mosaic fish. But in her present state she couldn't feel gracious.

"I'm sorry. Your friend has every right to worship fish or goats or hopping fleas if she likes. I hope she won't be angry when she finds one of her cloaks gone."

"She won't. Anyway, she won't even know about it. I'll have it back on the peg in a little while."

She bit her lips, brought to sharp awareness of her own lying conduct, especially toward the boy who would have to pay for it. Theron stretched to wrap the coarse-woven brown

cloak around her shoulders. Its folds embraced her gown and reached just to her ankles. Exactly what she needed for her purpose.

"You are very good, Theron." She caught his fingers in her own. "Thank you, my friend. Do you know, you are the only friend I have in all the world?"

He was embarrassed by her emotion and squeezed his hand out of her fingers. "No, I'm not. Lots of people like you. Domitian. And Helios. And old Elim. Lots of people."

Without any idea of what his reminder meant, he had accomplished what she needed—lashed her into a renewed desperation. I've got to escape immediately, she vowed silently. No matter who is hurt.

Lysandra and Theron left the room in time to see several toga-clad Romans wandering around the great audience chamber, loud in their complaints of the absent Emperor Nero.

"The ones with the widest stripe down the side of the toga are senators," Theron pointed out. "And the fancy one with all the rings and jewelry is Salvius Otho."

Lysandra recognized the effete fellow in the toupee who had purchased Daphne. "Otho, the man who wants to be emperor," she remarked.

Theron was indifferent to Otho's ambitions. "He has a governorship in Hispania. But he's second to General Galba. He's trying to get the empire for old man Galba."

"Are you sure?" Lysandra whispered. She remembered all too well Otho's incautious remarks about fomenting a revolt against his onetime friend Nero. She looked around for Daphne with anxiety and some curiosity.

She saw the girl at the far end of the audience chamber. There was no mistaking the great cloud of curly red hair, but for the rest her short, well-curved body caught the sunlight from the long south window embrasures and she glowed like a chubby brass cupid. She wore a brass-colored gown of gauze and silk and fairly dripped brass jewelry, wristlets, an anklet, a wide brass girdle, and a necklace of rust-gold topaz.

Something less than twenty-four hours had been enormously profitable to Daphne. Lysandra confessed to herself that she had been wrong about Salvius Otho's treatment of the girl. Daphne was one of those lucky human beings who always landed on her feet. Or perhaps she was simply a better judge of character than Lysandra had been.

Theron asked worriedly, "Are you still cold?"

She shook her head. He started along the colonnade beneath the gallery. She knew they would soon reach her bedchamber and she must be bolted in like a caged beast in the arena dungeons. She was wondering how she could attract Daphne's attention without making Theron suspicious when the boy saved her the trouble.

"You see that pretty red-haired slave following Otho? He's the governor I told you about. She's waving to us. Do you know her?"

"Very well." She thought fast. "We were supposed to report to the Lady Acté, who would take us to Caesar. But the slave dealer brought us to Helios instead."

Theron looked perplexed. "He shouldn't have done that."

"If I could reach Acté . . ." she suggested, hoping he didn't notice the quick light of hope she felt.

"It wasn't right. Or legal. You ought to be at her villa. She's leaving for Greece, and she could take you." He grimaced. "But Otho's slave woman, she'd be hard to get away. She looks as if she likes Otho." He nudged Lysandra and whispered, "He looks real friendly. But he's not. He does things to animals and people. He's cruel. And he doesn't always tell the truth. He tried to turn people in Rome against the emperor. I've heard him."

"Like your friend Domitian."

He shrugged. "That's different." Nevertheless, he hadn't lived in the palace for nothing. He was almost as diplomatic as Governor Otho when that gentleman, urged by Daphne, moved toward Lysandra.

"So the emperor's lovely property has gone no further! Surely our noble Acté would oblige her beloved master by hurrying you across the Adriatic to meet him."

Lysandra noted with interest that a tiny thread of annoyance marred Daphne's bubbling enthusiasm. Gods! She was afraid her master might acquire another slave, a rival. Nothing could be further from Lysandra's plans. She pulled the ugly cloak even closer around her, knowing that brown was her least flattering color.

"That was the intention, excellency. But I believe there was some understanding between the slave dealer, El Kedar, and the man who calls himself the Lord Helios."

She looked disheveled and probably not very desirable, thanks to her scuffle in the library with Domitian, and her angry sweeping back of the untidy hair that had so disguised her even Maximian failed to recognize her. Daphne hugged

her, murmuring, "Oh, if you could have my luck! Just look at what my dear master lets me wear. It used to belong to his favorite mistress."

"You look wonderful, Daphne. I'm happy for you." She saw curious red blotches on the girl's flesh, along the low neckline of her gown, but this didn't trouble the slave girl any more than the exposed, globular breast with its proud, painted nipple which made Lysandra flinch, remembering her own embarrassment in such a gown. Daphne, however, saw her body as her masters saw it, as her excellent, well-kept merchandise.

Salvius Otho fondled Daphne's breast with a possessive but unthinking air as he pursued a subject that was of more immediate importance. Not sex, but politics.

"What plans does this eunuch Helios have for you? I mean," he explained, "why would he act against Nero's interests? Is he in some kind of conspiracy?"

Lysandra owed no favors to the eunuch. Quite the contrary when she remembered his insistence on being called her master, as well as his more intimate humiliations. She looked at Otho innocently.

"I believe he would like to see another man emperor."

That touched him on a raw spot. "Who is his patron? For whom does he have ambitions?"

"The Flavian family, one of General Vespasian's sons. At the moment I believe it is the younger. Domitian. The eunuch is working for him."

"Ah." There was a world of thought in that single expression. She let the implications penetrate his ambitious brain. "And are there any others who share this treasonous idea?"

"I have no way of knowing, excellency. It is a pity, though, to think they are trying so hard to oblige the young Domitian."

Daphne nudged her master. "If my friend Sandra was with Acté, she might be able to tell you what Caesar plans. After all, dear excellency, you are always talking about Nero. He is more important than General Vespasian's sons."

"True. Very true. But your friend is not with Acté."

Theron had been tugging at Lysandra, urging her back to her bedchamber prison, but he volunteered now, "Lady Acté is at her villa. If Sandra belongs to Caesar, then somebody ought to take her to the villa and she can go with Acté to Greece."

Daphne raised her pale-red eyebrows, signaling a question to Lysandra, who nodded. Daphne then asked gaily, "Why not, master? It would help you to have a friend at Nero's court, wouldn't it?"

Otho considered Lysandra. "But is she my friend?"

Lysandra had no hesitation in promising, "I am certainly the friend of the man who saves me from Helios."

Otho smiled. "I can appreciate your feelings. He is a beautiful creature but not in the least human, and devious as a serpent. He cares nothing for the good of Rome, as I do."

Two of the senators who had toured the big audience chamber heard Otho's boast and exchanged glances. Lysandra noticed that the two did not necessarily agree with Otho's assessment of himself, though they had been talking with him in conspiratorial tones only minutes before.

Cynically, Lysandra observed to herself, They don't even trust their own kind. She was glad. In their weakness might be found her own strength.

But Otho was still spinning his own web. He had much in common with the eunuch, as she had suspected.

"Do you believe Domitian desired you, girl?"

"I have no way of knowing. He did not say."

Daphne insisted loyally, "How could he not desire her?"

Otho agreed, though with less enthusiasm. "Then, if she is taken from Domitian, he may blame Helios. We might spread the word that the eunuch is behind the disappearance of Domitian's new playmate. That should set the pot boiling." Then his attention was caught by Theron, who looked eager and willing but might not be trusted.

"And you, boy? Who is your master? Someone on the Palatine, of course. Where do your loyalties lie?"

"I belong to Acté, your excellency. My loyalty is to her."

"More than to Helios, I suspect," Otho pursued the matter, feeling him out.

"When Lady Acté is gone, Helios lets me work for him. He pays me. Sometimes fifty sesterces."

"But Acté is first with you. Even before the emperor himself?"

Theron shrugged. "He's all right. He is kind to Lady Acté."

While Otho made up his mind, Daphne whispered to Lysandra, "You don't want to stay in the palace, do you?"

Lysandra assured her she would rather be in Hades. "Gods! I believe this *is* Hades!"

In spite of their conversation, she moved in a haze of wonder as Otho urged her out of the audience chamber, through the west portals, with Theron and Daphne following excitedly. Daphne kept describing the many litters her master, Governor Otho, owned, and how one was waiting at the south gates even now. But through all this pleasant knowledge that she would be free of the Palatine and its horrors at any minute, Lysandra was almost paralyzed with fear that the eunuch would somehow discover what they were up to, and regain his prisoner.

The little group had already passed and been saluted by two of the fire and police patrol, the *vigiles*, and were leaving by the ancient merchants' gate when Lysandra's worst nightmare took shape. The white-clad figure of the eunuch Helios suddenly appeared, strolling toward them from the city street.

He had great self-control. He saw Salvius Otho make a sign to the six slaves who guarded the double litter beside the gates. The men had been lounging against the wall of an imperial stable, but they all snapped to attention at sight of Governor Otho, entirely ignoring Helios, who looked from the elaborate silk-and-leather curtains of the litter to Lysandra. She raised her chin and tried to return that bright, cold stare of his. She was ashamed of her cowardice, but the man's power to destroy her physically and emotionally was so great she moved closer to the Roman.

Helios said pleasantly, "Hail to you, Salvius Otho. You are a lucky man, surrounded by so much beauty."

The Roman laid a possessive hand on Daphne's neck, explaining, "This one is my property, but this other goes to Caesar." With his natural arrogance toward a creature he despised, Otho added sarcastically, "Unless you have other ideas."

Lysandra wondered if Helios would challenge one of the foremost Roman patricians, but he was too clever for that. He was all sweetness and humility.

"I, interfere with Caesar's rights? Never, excellency." But he was moving closer to Lysandra as he spoke, and even her flesh shrank from his touch. "I am only a little—puzzled."

Obviously, Otho too had expected a different reaction.

"Puzzled? When I am returning property that goes to Nero by law?"

"But the emperor is in Greece. This property may be delayed in reaching him. Surely your excellency might utilize the property until Caesar returns."

"Not interested," Otho snapped, moving on. Daphne was relieved, but Lysandra knew the eunuch was not done. He reached out, his fingers fastening in the coarse slave's cloak that she had wrapped around her. Though she tried to hold the cloak in place, Helios snapped it off. Theron, who had watched this byplay with interest, knelt to save Acté's robe from the cobblestones.

Otho was impressed by his first view of Lysandra in the violet gown. He stared at her bared flesh, moistening his lips, his hunger rising. Helios smiled as the patrician considered Lysandra's throat, her barely covered breasts, and the sensual display of her abdomen and hips. His active sexual drive battled with an even more active political ambition.

Daphne picked at his shoulder. "But you need her in the emperor's house," she reminded him in a low voice. Her hint was the weapon Lysandra needed to plead her own case.

"Excellency, it is well to have the gratitude of those in the imperial household. And you would have mine."

The patrician brightened. "Very true. Sometimes it is necessary to make sacrifices for the good of Rome." Ignoring Helios, he beckoned to his litter bearers.

The eunuch inclined his head, yielding gracefully, and went on past them. He saw Theron, who had thrown the robe over Lysandra's shoulders, and held out his hand.

"Come, boy. I have work for you. The little Persian princess might suit Domitian. She is a blonde, and that is something."

Lysandra caught Otho's toga. "Please don't let him punish the boy."

The eunuch heard this and looked back.

"I never hurt those who are useful to me. Farewell, Sandra, until we meet again." His cool expression softened to a smile for Salvius Otho. "Next time, excellency, call upon me to serve you in my humble way, and you may not have to make a choice. Who knows? All Rome might be yours. Including the imperial property."

There was a little silence as Otho escorted the women to the big double litter. There he stopped to look back toward the palace gates.

"I may have misjudged that fellow. He has the right instincts. And his politics are sound."

Lysandra wondered at the blindness of this greedy patrician who actually thought himself equipped to rule the world. As for herself, she had no doubt that Helios was the deadliest

of her enemies. But though she knew this, she never forgot that General Maximian and his wife were responsible for her fall into the power of the eunuch.

They were the ultimate betrayers. She knew that to her dying day Maximian's casual description of her as Domitian's secret whore was burned on her memory.

Chapter Eleven

It was late in the evening and the spring air threatened rain when Lysandra arrived at the little villa in the Campanian countryside. Hardly a home for the emperor's mistress, even a discarded one. She remarked on its simplicity to the wagon driver who had delivered her at the front gate of the villa still wrapped in Claudia Acté's old brown cloak.

He swung her to the ground without ceremony, anxious to return to Rome and get his sleep. Like all classes, rich or poor, his day began before dawn and he was usually in bed by nightfall.

"They call it a villa but it's just a farm. Nero's friend Phaon has a big farm nearby, off the Ostian Way. This place was in Nero's family before he was emperor. He was mighty poor in those days, when his Uncle Caligula was running things."

She could see fields and vineyards vaguely outlined on the near horizon, but the countryside beyond was covered with low brush and boggy patches between wooded areas that cast long shadows over the low farmhouse.

Cheerful lights shone through one broken shutter in the room at the front of the wood-and-concrete building with its red tile roof. She could hear the pleasant, homely mutterings of geese nearby and knew her arrival had disturbed these excellent watch dogs. Farther away a cock crowed under the impression that the lantern flickering on the wagon might be the sunrise.

Scrawny olive trees stood sentinel beside the door where Lysandra was left to wait nervously before getting up the courage to announce her arrival. Except for Theron's praise of his patroness, the Lady Acté, she had no reason to believe the woman would be any different in her treatment of a slave than El Kedar, Helios, or even Otho had been.

The grizzled old wagoneer waved to her, wished her well, and gave his mule the signal to turn around, avoiding the

covered well at one corner of the yard. She was sorry to see him go. He and Theron were the only friends she had made since her nightmare arrival in Rome.

She took a deep breath and raised her hand to rattle the big, rusty latch on the door, when the door itself opened, startling her so that she backed into the straggling olive tree. The thin, dark, middle-aged woman in the doorway called out to the barnyard with the faint intonation of her native Greek, "You, Cleopatra, quiet! Cincinnatus, it isn't morning yet! Stop that crowing."

With the utmost calm and no apparent fear she addressed Lysandra behind her without looking around. "How may I help you? Have you had an accident? The Ostian traffic is so dangerous! You must be constantly on the watch at this hour of the night."

She didn't wait for an answer. She waved a towel and moved out into the yard. Here she shooed back the big, wandering gray goose Cleopatra who had waddled over to investigate the night visitor.

Wherever the front of this curious plebeian farm might be, Lysandra had been delivered to a slaves' entrance. The warm, well-lighted room inside was a kitchen, and this doubtless explained why Lysandra had found no portico, no elegant arch or gateway, simply gravel and grass underfoot as she waited to be ordered inside. Nothing about this place or the serving woman who greeted her and then went off chasing geese had anything to do with the mistress and confidante of the Roman emperor.

The woman came back, wiping perspiration from her forehead with the back of her hand, though the night was cool and damp. She waved the towel at Lysandra exactly as she had done to Cleopatra the goose.

"Come in, child. No need to shiver when there is a perfectly good fire inside."

"Thank you." Greatly relieved, Lysandra slipped into the friendly kitchen with its big table for preparing foods, a wall of pots, pans, and kettles, most of them shining copper, plus shelves for dishes of every kind from silver and copper to plebeian crockery. There were the usual backless chair and stool, and one chair like an old wooden throne in need of paint, but with a back and arms.

"For the emperor. He used to sit here in the kitchen sometimes. Though now he travels so much. His concerts and recitals, you know. . . ." Her voice trailed off. She offered

Lysandra a stool by the big central brick oven in which bits of peat and charcoal from the swampy Campania managed to heat rocks of various sizes which gave the whole interior of the stove and even the room itself a red-orange glow.

Lysandra did not remove the cloak but threw it back on her shoulders. The woman before her was so respectably dressed, in a coarse-woven gown of dull green with no ornaments of any kind, that Lysandra was embarrassed to show herself in the vivid clothing that announced her degraded station in life.

"When the Lady Acté is able to see me, I have some matters to explain to her. A young friend, Theron, told me that she would understand."

"I'm sure she will," the serving woman agreed, taking a big kettle off the grate on top of the oven and ladling out what smelled like a delicious thickened stew. "Of young kid and the vegetables grown here on the farm, including the grapes. I think they give it a special tang. You will share my late supper, I hope."

The odor of the food and the woman's kindness managed to restore the appetite Lysandra thought she had lost long ago in Lutetia.

She settled down to a bowl of stew with the knife and spoon the woman gave her. The food was every bit as flavorful as it had smelled, but the woman, though kind in every way, seemed inordinately curious about Lysandra. Perhaps she thought this newcomer who had arrived in sinister fashion after dark would threaten her position in some way.

When she had praised the stew, Lysandra said quickly, "I am not a slave. I mean, I wasn't born a slave. My father was sentenced for a crime committed by the wife of a famous general."

The woman settled down beside her at the scarred wooden table and began to eat but managed to study Lysandra at the same time.

"And your father wasn't a citizen. So you were sold into slavery?"

"To pay the imperial treasury for what they said he had stolen. Romans!" She splashed the spoon into the stew to punctuate her real feelings. "They ravage the world and leave it in pieces—like me."

Lady Acté's cook smiled faintly. "I wonder if we all thought that once. But is there a better system in this world? You say your father was innocent, that a general's wife com-

mitted the crime. If your father was entirely innocent, then this is the worst of crimes to a Roman. Injustice."

Lysandra considered her spoon, turned it over. "He wasn't innocent. But he was only half guilty. The general's wife was the one. I hate them! Nothing—not all the pantheon of gods—will keep me from paying them back!"

"Child, how useless hate is!"

"It keeps me alive," she said flatly.

Her companion did not contradict her. Lysandra felt a little ashamed at having upset a woman who might be in the same situation, helpless against indignities and abuse. She changed the subject. In spite of this good woman's comforting presence, Lysandra still dreaded her first meeting with the lady who might be the most powerful influence in Rome.

"Is the Lady Acté at home?"

"Yes. But you are lucky to have arrived tonight. By dawn she will be on her way to Greece. The emperor has honored her by asking that she make the voyage home with him."

Lysandra tried to express herself carefully, since Theron had showed her how well loved was the emperor's mistress.

"They say the Lady Acté follows a religion like that of the Jews." She added hurriedly, "The Jews are good citizens in Rome. They never pray for its destruction like the dreadful Christian sect during the Great Fire."

"Those were zealots and extremists. The Romans mustn't judge all Christians by those few."

Lysandra shrugged and went on eating. "Anyway, they are all gone now. Up in Gaul we heard they were all punished after the Great Fire."

The woman said quietly, "Many were coated with pitch and burned in the palace gardens."

Lysandra shuddered. "But the Lady Acté has a strange religion too. Someone told me she worships a fish."

The woman smiled. "Not precisely." She reached over and touched Lysandra's cloak.

"Be comfortable, child. You must be very warm." Her touch loosened the brown cloth, and the cloak fell away before Lysandra could catch it. She scrambled for it, but her hostess stopped her with gentle firmness.

"No. There is no shame to you. The gown is beautiful on you. When I first came to the Palatine as a slave, they dressed me so, but more naked." She pointed to her breast. "I was very young. And I met kindness in the palace."

"From the Lady Acté?" It was surprising how comforted

Lysandra felt under the influence of this plain serving woman.

Her question startled the woman, who smiled and corrected her, "From young Nero, who freed me."

"He freed you as well as Lady—?" Lysandra broke off, looked around the room, listened, but heard nothing in the rest of the house. She stared at her hostess, who was still smiling at her stupefaction. "You are the Lady Claudia Acté."

The woman corrected her. "It is a false title. You were born a patrician. I wasn't. I am simply Claudia Acté, born a slave and later, by great good fortune, the friend of Nero."

"And I have spoken to you—mentioned things—I had no right. I don't know what to say, how to ask your forgiveness."

"Say you are glad to give me company tonight. I have a maid and a manservant who are being entertained at the farm of the emperor's friend Phaon, near the Ostian Way. I'm afraid they won't have heads for travel tomorrow. Now that you have eaten, what else shall we do with you?"

It humiliated Lysandra to spell out her own fate, but she knew she was lucky that her temporary owner was this kind and understanding woman. Who would have dreamed that such a highly placed courtesan could be so simple and unassuming?

"I was sent by the general to become the property of the emperor. If he chooses to sell me, the purchase price goes into the imperial coffers. The general suggested that I would be safe under your protection. But he lied in so many ways. He said he was your friend."

Acté raised her head. "Not General Max!"

Lysandra nodded, sickened as always by the memory of her early feelings for him and how he had betrayed those feelings.

Acté tapped the girl's knuckles. "Then we may straighten out this mistake. Maximian has never lied to me, and he will stop by tonight to give me military dispatches for the emperor and Emperor Vespasian in Greece."

"No. Not again!" Lysandra got up so fast the table rattled and the stool was overturned. "He called me a whore. That's how he thinks of me. The one man in all the world that I could have . . . that I hate."

For the first time this kindly woman annoyed her by pat-

ting her arm and saying, "You will outgrow these feelings. They are so negative, they weaken your happiness."

Happiness! Lysandra thought bitterly.

But Acté went on, "Since you are imperial property, I will take you with me to Greece. If you prefer not to see Maximian, then it will be as you wish. Tonight you may find it warmer and more comfortable to sleep in this little cubicle opening off the kitchen where my cook usually sleeps. But he has been sent to the home of General Max's wife, Ancaris, in Pompeii. Ancaris is the natural daughter of the legion imperator, Vespasian." She saw Lysandra's eyes flash and understood. "Was Lady Ancaris involved in your father's condemnation?"

"She suggested the crime to him. But her husband didn't believe me."

Acté took up a lamp, lighted the floating wick, and walked with Lysandra through a narrow wooden passage smelling of fresh rain, to a tiny room furnished with a cot, a stool, and some hooks on the wall from which hung the absent cook's aprons, an old tunic, and an all-weather cloak. She stumbled over a pair of worn sandals and Acté shoved them out of the way. As Lysandra sat down on the cot, suddenly aware that she was tired in every bone, Acté tried to explain Maximian's wife.

"She is pathetic in many ways. She was a bastard. She was beautiful and badly spoiled as a child. Then she grew up and learned there were things she couldn't have. Like legitimacy and her husband's love. Maximian was forced to marry her."

"Poor man."

Acté overlooked the sarcasm. "In some ways. He has devoted his life to his career, and he owes that career to Vespasian. Vespasian can be stubborn, and he has always spoiled his daughter. General Max had no choice. I suspect he married Ancaris out of gratitude to her father."

"And to save his position. Don't forget that." Lysandra waved aside pity. "So now this Ancaris uses her poor brother Domitian and dreams of being his unofficial empress."

She had surprised Acté at last. "You speak of 'poor Domitian,' but you feel nothing for General Maximian. However, this is understandable. You have my prayers. Sleep now. We leave early. We'll talk some other time."

Not about this, Lysandra thought. Not about forgiveness. Too much has happened. . . .

Hatred warmed her as she lay down and pulled the heavy

robe up to her shoulders. She dreamed of her vengeance. It took many forms, none of them satisfactory. She couldn't imagine the general and his wife suffering the degradation she had felt at the hands of the soldier in Gaul, or the eunuch, or worst of all, as the "whore" Maximian had called her.

After what seemed long hours of restless sleep, she was aroused by the sound of her name spoken in a sharp, metallic female voice. A quarrel was in progress in the room beyond this wall. Only an hour or two had passed. Had she actually heard her name, or was it part of her dream? The lamp still burned smokily.

She got up, stepped into her sandals, and made her way silently through the passage to a door which opened into the main room of the farmhouse. The door creaked when she opened it, but the quarreling woman was making such a disturbance the sound went unnoticed. Lysandra stood with one eye to the door, which she left ajar.

There was no altar to the family gods and ancestors in the long room, and no center pool, as in most atriums. An odd place for Acté to entertain. But then, so was the kitchen. The room was comfortable but unlike a Roman house, with no formal arrangements, only couches, lamps, tabarets, and a bird cage whose occupant fluttered angrily, no doubt objecting to the disturbance.

Even if Lysandra had not recognized the voice, there was no mistaking the slim golden reed that was the Lady Ancaris. Her cold, supercilious manner was gone, whereas the woman who listened to her angry tirade was as gently calm as ever. Women like Ancaris had long ago failed to upset Claudia Acté. She saw too many, and apparently had her own inner security.

"She couldn't have been given to your brother, my lady, no matter how well pleased he was. She is not your property or that of your husband. The woman Lysandra belongs to the empire. That is, to Nero. However, General Max should be here in the night with messages for the emperor, and I will tell him how you feel."

"Max!" Ancaris cried. She couldn't seem to stand still and began to stride up and down, flexing her fingers against the silk-threaded fine wool palla she still wore, though the room seemed warm. "He is sending my little brother off to die on some idiotic battlefield. The Syrians are betraying us to the Parthians. The Jews are rebelling against Agrippa, their king." She swung around and stopped in front of Acté, who

sat quietly in a cerule chair, watching her. "Do you know what I heard? My older brother, Titus, Father's beloved military genius, is conducting an affair with the sister of the Jewish King, Queen Berenice. And still my father favors him over Domitian, who is a true Roman and should be the next emperor."

"We have an emperor, my lady," Acté reminded the distraught woman.

Ancaris was stopped by her own indiscretion. She took off the first fold of the palla with a graceful gesture and sat down beside Acté on the side of a couch. She came as near as it was possible for her to come to an apology.

"I am behaving badly. This is no way to persuade my husband. I must not antagonize him." She locked her fingers and leaned toward Acté. "He mustn't take Domitian. The boy could be killed."

Acté took her hand briefly. "I know. But Domitian was a very good soldier when he went out on campaign two years ago with his father."

"Yes. At fifteen. The risk was appalling."

Acté reminded her gently, "You complain because he is compared to his distinguished brother Titus. But by keeping him enslaved to you, you destroy his manhood. You must let him go, my lady."

Ancaris lowered her head, resting her forehead against her hands. Even to her watching enemy, Lysandra, she looked dejected. Her voice sounded muffled. It was hard to believe this frail creature was the ruthless woman who had destroyed Perseus and his daughter.

"Acté, he's like my child. I know he will soon be eighteen, but Domitian is lost without me." She considered the rushes on the floor below her locked fingers. "I must stay here until my husband comes. He ordered Domitian off to the barracks, and I couldn't get in. I couldn't stop either of them. Not there."

"Stay if you like, my lady." Acté got up. "But it may be a long wait. Do you drink Falernian? I'm afraid my servants will not be returning until the early hours. Excuse me. I'll be back soon."

"I prefer Setinian, please. Not that it matters. If only I could have kept that black-haired Gallic woman for Domitian! She was different enough to attach him briefly. But she might keep him here a little longer, while Titus and my husband get over this business of Domitian's going to battle. Af-

ter that, we could have gotten rid of her, sent her on to Nero, or anywhere."

Lysandra's fingers closed on the door latch. She fancied for a minute the brass itself was crumbling in her fierce grasp. Then a shadow blocked her view and she moved back quickly. Acté pushed the door open and came past Lysandra on her way to the kitchen. She must have been startled, but she merely waved two fingers for silence. She whispered, "Remain here."

Lysandra insisted furiously, "I want to challenge that creature."

"I'm sure you do. But I hope she will be gone before her husband arrives. We don't want to delay her longer than we must."

Lysandra hesitated. It would be unbearable to have Maximian see her again like this. He would forever think of her as a cheap slave and harlot. But her blood boiled when she remembered Ancaris, who went on and on trying to punish her. For what? She didn't know.

She went into the kitchen and helped Acté with the copper tray and a goblet full of bubbling Setinian wine, but she refused to leave the hall afterward. She wanted to hear anything Acté's conniving visitor might say, even if she had to listen behind doors.

Ancaris drank her wine, walking up and down, waving the goblet, and at last gave up. As she finished the wine, she decided, "He isn't coming. I knew it! He probably lied to you just to avoid me."

"Child, he doesn't know you are here."

Ancaris had a sudden idea and began to wrap the palla around her, but the complicated folds baffled her.

"Call my servants. Zostra is waiting in the carriage. She knows how to arrange me. I don't know why I didn't think of it before, but Max is sure to take some time with Domitian in the legion camp, saying their goodbyes and all. Even if I can't get in, I'll wait outside the gates."

"Perhaps that is wise." Acté went out the front door and clapped her hands, summoning the aged Persian body-slave, who came in grumbling over the rheumatism that had settled in her hip. In a few seconds the palla was gracefully arranged and the old woman got up from her knees just as they all heard a soldier's step outside.

Acté glanced uneasily at the kitchen passage. The door was still ajar, and she must know Lysandra was listening. Lysan-

dra felt a stifling sensation as Ancaris cried triumphantly, "It's Max. I know that step."

And Lysandra knew it. But she remembered too vividly the last time she had heard it, and she hid behind the door, frozen with something beyond fear, a dread that the scene in Domitian's library might be repeated.

The front door opened inward from a miniature marble portico with two small columns. Acté's expected guest knocked on the door frame with his short command staff and came striding in immediately after. As Lysandra watched from the dark kitchen passage, she was astonished to see him ignore Acté's friendly outstretched hand and envelop her in his arms, half-smothering her in his red military cape.

"*Carissima*, it's to be a violent campaign. You must pray to your precious god for me."

"Mine is a god of peace," she told him as she freed herself in her friendly way. "But I will pray for you, general."

Lysandra clutched her chilled bare arms, imagined his embrace, felt the warmth, the muscular strength, and his tenderness as he greeted Acté. She was shocked out of her dream by the silvery tinkle of the Lady Ancaris' voice.

"Max. Do stop that. I want to talk to you."

He turned from Acté, set her aside, and stepped around her to get a good look at his wife. She went on in a proprietary manner that didn't seem to stir him very much. "Domitian is too young to be going into battle with you and Titus."

Maximian kissed the cheek she presented and spoke over her head to Acté. "Call my wife's litter. Or carriage. Whatever it is. She is leaving."

"I have called it, excellency."

His obvious lack of response to her plea upset his wife's arrogant temper. She began to threaten. "If you take Domitian, I'll see that Father takes your command from you. And I can do it, too."

"I doubt it . . . Acté, my best centurion, Enobarbus, was ordered to put a young woman in your care. A ward of the imperial treasury. They tell me in camp that he never arrived in Rome. Something about a drunken brawl and injuries in Lugdunum on the way. Do you know anything about this?"

Lysandra was sure Acté signaled him to silence with her hand on his arm before she went to the doorway, calling two of Ancaris' male slaves to join the old Persian, Zostra, in escorting Ancaris out of the farmhouse. But the general's wife

remained rooted to the floor and chose the best way of holding her husband's attention.

"You musn't count on Enobarbus, my dear. He was so drunk the Gallic governor had him hauled off to his bed, and on the way poor Enobarbus slipped and broke his leg."

Maximian pushed the heavy helmet back on his head with his thumb. "Enobarbus never drinks on a mission."

"And was the transporting of a pretty slave girl your idea of a mission?"

"When she was imperial property, yes."

Acté had looked from husband to wife and now left them, going to the kitchen passage. Lysandra shrank away from her.

In that instant, Lysandra thought anything would be better than to meet General Max again in the very gown that had already degraded her in his eyes. Though her downfall was his fault, she remained a slave with all its connotations. He must know after one real look at her that she was no longer the virginal, respectable young lady he had met only a month ago. Even though she had been assaulted by only one man, she felt that in some insidious way the eunuch's sexual examination marked her entrance into prostitution. She and Maximian would never again meet as the equals they had been when they had first known each other in Lutetia.

Such matters obviously didn't concern Acté. She took Lysandra's hand in a firm grasp. With a prayer to ancient, long-forgotten gods of her childhood, the girl managed a shaky pride and stood in the doorway as Acté presented her. But she felt like merchandise on sale in the marketplace.

Acté said with a smile, "Your imperial property has been safely delivered, general."

Ancaris laughed, a cutting little sound of triumph, as Maximian waved away the slave girl in her deep-violet gown.

"No. This was an entirety—" Then his sunburned features seemed to darken, whether with shock or disgust Lysandra couldn't tell, but his reaction when he recognized her was engraved on her memory. He looked around, like one who had lost his way.

"Oh, yes," Ancaris assured him. "That is your pure Gallic maiden. I am told Domitian enjoyed her. And, of course, the soldiers who brought her to Rome."

"Liar!" Lysandra cried. "That woman is as guilty as my father was." She swung around to Maximian, who had been

shaken out of his horror at the change in the girl he had hoped to save.

"I tried to make you safe! I didn't know!" His voice broke with some emotion. She had no doubt it was pity or shame at his own part in her destruction. He reached for her hand. She backed away, loathing his pity.

"Does it matter? It is too late now."

At least he was as shamed and upset as she had prayed he would be. Ancaris tried to speak to him, but he turned on her so quickly with his fist raised that Acté had to get between him and his wife. For the first time Lysandra saw the iron strength that had kept the gentle Acté alive, though all of Nero's other friends had died long since his great early days as emperor.

"Go, my lady. For your own sake. Your brother will be safe."

"Are you sure? Does your god promise it?" Ancaris had lost her triumphant smile.

Acté said, "You must have faith."

Ancaris looked curiously drawn and haggard in the flicker of the lamps. Was this simply her fear for her brother? Or was she ill? In either case, Lysandra was glad of it. She wanted the woman to suffer. In the doorway Ancaris made a prediction that none of her hearers understood.

"I have a certain piece of information that will keep you with me forever, Max. Father will see to that." She let herself be led out by Zostra, with her other servants following after an exchange of knowing looks. They must have seen many of these domestic quarrels between Ancaris and Maximian.

Maximian started toward Lysandra again, but there was no mistaking the awful shock in his eyes. Lysandra read her own feelings there and avoided him.

"Don't touch me. It was you who made me like this." She saw him wince as she pointed to the soft, bared flesh between her breasts and the naked exposure of her navel and abdomen.

He let his hand fall but called hoarsely to Acté, who was closing the door behind Ancaris.

"Gods! Must you shame the girl with this harlot's rag? She should be dressed properly, like the daughter of a Gallic king. If you aren't careful, you will have every rogue from here to Athens after her."

"Like a bitch dog?" Lysandra snapped. "You made me that, excellency."

Before she could escape his touch again, he had her by the shoulders. Some of his anger at his wife and what had befallen Lysandra remained when he held her between his hands.

"I never knew. I swear by Apollo, Taker of Oaths! I wanted you clean and whole, as you were. I never intended this."

Insult upon insult. She remained stiff and motionless in his hands. She demanded of Acté, "Must I bed with him when I am no longer clean or whole, or as I was? He said I am imperial property. Sell me to another buyer. I'll bed with anyone in the empire but this man."

Maximian shook her. "You don't mean that. I understand how you really feel."

What a ridiculous lie! How could he ever know, unless he himself was enslaved? She would rejoice in that moment!

Meanwhile, Acté was trying to release her from his grasp. "General Max! You told me you must be on the road by the second hour. It is past midnight now."

He let Lysandra go at last, but still held out one hand in case she could not stand without support. What a weakling he must think she was! She ignored his hand as she avoided looking at his face. She remembered too painfully the warmth and humor in those hazel eyes during their first meetings. She felt him draw away from her at last.

He said to Acté, "You will give her something decent to wear? And take care of her. Don't let her be given to anyone. If things go well with me in the Parthian campaign, Nero may owe me a favor. I'll ask for her." He took several thin papyrus rolls from his heavy metal belt. "This is for Caesar. The others are for Vespasian. Farewell."

With the papyrus rolls in her hands, Acté walked with him to the door. "Good luck, general. The One God go with you."

"The whole pantheon of gods. Let's not be miserly," he retorted from the misty night, his voice light for the first time since he had seen Lysandra in the bright harlot's gown.

Lysandra thought, I hope I may never see him again. But it was maddening to find her throat choked with pain over the prospect.

When Acté came back in, she found Lysandra had not moved. She said briskly, "we have a great deal to do if we are going to leave before dawn. And that tiresome woman of mine will probably be sick with too much wine. No matter.

Come along, child. General Max is right. We don't want to advertise your beauty."

She seemed genuinely happy. And yet, this woman had come to Rome as a slave, been used and degraded, and had served Nero as a slave served her master. Had she really learned to love him?

Lysandra wondered if her own future might hold such a fate, a substitute for happiness found in good works and her adoration of a man far beyond her reach in the legal sense. Lysandra couldn't feel any of Acté's joy, but she did have a certain curiosity about what would happen to her by decision of Acté's beloved master, Nero.

Chapter Twelve

Surrounded by the cheerfulness of Acté's servants as they traveled over the stony Greek soil, and Acté's own unconcealed joy over her approaching reunion with the emperor Nero, Lysandra found it hard to remain depressed or bitter. Her arrival at the elegant country estate of Nero's Greek singing teacher, Cleophas, was wonderfully normal, as if she were still the young Gallic Lady Lysandra. She laid this lifting of her spirits to her change of wardrobe. It made all the difference. A simple wool gown with corded cross-girdling around her breasts and waist transformed her temporarily into a free woman and Acté's friend, rather than a piece of imperial property.

There had been sunny skies ever since their arrival in Achaea, the lower Greek peninsula. The weather was fortunate. The area itself was depressing enough, as Lysandra discovered; for it contained nothing but grass-grown ruins, names like Sparta and Corinth, and memories of brave battles, Olympic games, and music contests.

"Nero dreams of reviving the past," Acté explained, when Lysandra wanted to know why the ruler of the world was hidden away in the desolate Greek countryside. "He has done quite well in reviving trade, for instance, where he appears in his own production of *The Burning of Troy*, or *Queen Dido's Lament*."

But this in no way mitigated his strangeness to Lysandra. "Shouldn't he be back in Rome, attending to imperial affairs? I've heard men, even senators, provincial governors, talk treason against him. He should be at home, proving they are liars."

Acté was walking with her through the exquisite formal garden of the Greek villa, a far cry from the simple farm near Rome which was Acté's "villa." It was hard to believe that beyond the brick walls of this estate was a countryside ravaged by time, where Roman systems of irrigations had not

been introduced for years. The grass crept up between the ancient stones, all that remained of a civilization that had blossomed over five hundred years ago.

Acté answered Lysandra's complaint by the reminder, "He is returning to Rome at once. Now, we must prepare you for the emperor. He is rehearsing this morning." Obviously, Acté knew the talk that was going on in Rome. She was fully aware of Ancaris' ambitions for her younger brother Domitian. Perhaps the secret of Acté's survival was her discretion.

"Must I meet the emperor today?" Realizing this wasn't the happiest comment to a woman who clearly adored Nero, Lysandra explained hurriedly, "I am honored, my lady—" Acté put up one finger. "I mean, Acté, but I am not used to serving. I would only irritate him."

Acté stopped before they entered the colonnade and the atrium beyond. "Here are some early iris. Nero likes them." She gestured to Lysandra, who took the hint and snapped off several of the long stalks with their blowsy flowers. While she was arranging them in one hand, Acté warned her, "He expects you. I mentioned you last night."

"Then you were with him after we arrived? He must have been very glad to see you."

Acté said calmly, "He did not sleep with me. There were—others. But he was happy to see me. And he agreed that I might bring you by before his performance this afternoon at the theater. He will be most kind when you tell him how you really feel about his voice. And the play, which he created as well."

Startled, Lysandra recalled the warning of the masseuse in the baths on the Palatine. "But if he shouldn't be . . . at his best?"

"Child, he is always at his best. Therefore, there can be no problem. I have never heard him other than superb. Ask any of his friends and servants."

Lysandra understood.

During the long journey from Rome to the once-glorious amphitheaters of Greece, Lysandra had been haunted by the fears shared by slave girls much younger than she. Most important, she feared being used so freely for sexual purposes that sex would no longer have any connection with love, as was the case with Daphne. Lysandra had assumed that the emperor would find but one interest in her, and that would be sexual. Her chief reliance remained upon Acté's jealousy.

It had not surfaced so far, but she hoped that even at the last minute Acté would help her avoid the emperor's busy couch.

"I will be sure to admire his theater work. It must be very exciting. I meant that I am inexperienced. I could never satisfy him. And there is your promise to Maximian." It was hard to say, when she told herself she hated the general. "You told him I would be kept for him."

"Sometimes, child, there are more important things than the desires of a young man like Maximian. Nero is a sorely tried man. And it has been my effort to make him content and happy. He was once a great man and a great emperor. I dream that with the right influence he may return to be that man I once knew."

"But I am not that influence!"

"I told you others shared his couch these nights. Nero is a true artist. He believes an artist should experience all things. And his new body-slave, Sporus, is excessively handsome. I hope that someone may turn Nero back to the—shall we say—simpler pleasures. Then perhaps there will be less brutality. He won't need so much violence, or draw violence from others."

Lysandra was adjusting her thoughts and fears. The emperor's sexual taste for males might be to her advantage.

But Acté persisted wistfully, "It isn't too late yet for some woman of beauty and intelligence to entice him, remind him of the man he used to be."

She led the way through the severely Roman atrium with its shallow pool and open roof where bright sunlight poured in. As they passed the altar to the household gods, Lysandra superstitiously made a prayer to them. It was a selfish prayer, and she caught Acté smiling.

"You follow the religion of the Romans?"

"I follow any gods who will help me."

Acté shook her head. "I'm afraid you will never know real happiness until—once in a while—you offer prayers for others. Only once in a while," she repeated with her gentle railery.

"But I'm the one who needs prayers."

It sounded ugly, the flat, selfish words, but it was honest, and she left it there with no more excuses for herself.

They were out on the hilly ground with not a house or farm or villa in sight, only a low hill overgrown with weeds. It was the hill that seemed to be the goal of a score of walkers and one elegant litter carried by four husky slaves.

"Where are we going?" It was unusual for a new slave to walk freely without eagle-eyed spying by the family of slaves to whom she belonged. But she had soon learned that this was one of the rare gifts belonging to the household that served Claudia Acté.

"On the other side of that hill is the stage for Nero's performance this afternoon. We are looking at the back of the amphitheater itself, or what's left of it. It once had marble colonnades and seats built in a semicircle, rising against that hill. But in the last two hundred years people have carried away most of the marble and other valuables. You have seen some of the results in Cleophas' villa."

"As the emperor's singing teacher, does Cleophas dare to comment on his work?"

Without any sign of amusement, Acté said simply, "Of course. Always. He sees to it that Nero cares for his voice, and he is there to comment on Nero's triumphs."

Lysandra wondered if the ruler of the world ever had had a failure in his singing career. Back in Rome eager, ambitious patricians might be plotting to overthrow this last of the Caesars, but while Nero remained far away from such troublesome little matters, he could tell himself that the world loved him.

Lysandra saw signs of this affection when they reached the far side of the amphitheater and noted scattered groups, almost all male as was the Greek custom, seated on the broken tiers where their ancestors had watched their own immortal tragedies and comedies. But from the excitement among them over the prospect of watching Nero's rehearsal, they seemed to equate the emperor with Sophocles and Aeschylus. Some had even brought their lunch, greasy little cones full of sausage and chunks of bread.

Acté unwrapped a scarf and showed Lysandra the little jar she was carrying. "Honey for Nero's voice. His servants never bring enough. And this is a special type. It is made near the Campanian farm."

The amphitheater having fallen into ruin, the stage consisted of a wooden backdrop draped in scarlet for "Burning Troy," and a concrete floor reached by several steps on either side. Entrances and exits were open to the view of the audience. Therefore, Nero prepared himself, gargling, spitting into a gold-fringed napkin, and sucking spoonfuls of honey, in a cubicle at the side of the stage. Leather-and-velvet cur-

tains held up around him by his slaves provided a chilly but adequate dressing room.

Lysandra followed Acté inside the "dressing room," awed in spite of herself by the prospect of meeting the Roman emperor. She saw a heavy man of middle height, whose physique made her think of a muscular athlete gone to fat. It was common knowledge that in his youth Nero had been an athlete of great skill, but the natural excesses that went with great power had turned him into this flabby thirty-year-old man. She recognized the famous profile seen on coins, but thought the heavy mouth weaker than she had expected it to be. His green eyes were nearsighted, which surprised her, and his famous red hair was rapidly thinning. In other circumstances she might have found it sad that the well-intentioned, democratic last descendant of both the great Augustus and the House of Marc Antony had turned into this fat mountebank.

Acté was quickly permitted to approach Nero by the good-looking pederast, Sporus, while Lysandra came after her, hoping to escape notice. She had brushed the straight fringe of hair off her forehead, presenting a more severe look, and tied her hair back. Her birthday had occurred during the crossing of the Ionian Sea, and though she was now eighteen, she succeeded today in looking twenty-five. This suited her purposes. Curiously enough, Acté had made suggestions to improve her desirability, but made no objection to Lysandra's "disguise."

"It is only that I want to keep him happy, and like all artists, he loves to be surrounded by beauty," she had explained when Lysandra questioned her. "He saved me when I needed him desperately. Perhaps you will understand one day if a man some call 'wicked' should be kind to you."

Lysandra doubted it. The only man who had been remotely kind to her was young Domitian, and she couldn't imagine herself wanting to make him happy by her physical attentions.

Nero held out a pudgy hand to Acté. "Dear little friend, faithful as always. Sporus will take the honey. One of you give Acté a kiss for me. I've just gotten my paint right. How do I look?"

"Perfect Caesar," Cleophas, his teacher, said promptly. "You look the very image of the tragic Dido."

Lysandra was stupefied to discover that Nero had made himself up as a female. Sporus dropped the elaborate blond

wig over Nero's red hair, and the emperor tucked in stray locks.

"He is playing Queen Dido," Acté whispered, guessing Lysandra's thoughts. "This is where she weeps for the desertion of Aeneas. It is Nero's greatest scene."

The emperor heard this and smiled tremulously. "Pray for my success, Acté. Today will see my last performance in my beloved Greece. We leave tomorrow for Rome."

And about time, Lysandra thought. She wondered if he had any idea of his unpopularity in the capital.

But Nero was busy marveling at his own deep sensitivity. "Touch my hand, someone. Have you ever known my fingers so cold? The pressure grows worse with every performance. Suppose there comes a time when I can't better my own previous work."

His teacher, dressers, Sportus, and Acté murmured in a chorus, "Never, Caesar. That time will never come. You are divinely inspired."

He peered at Lysandra, trying to get a clear look at her. He actually wore red color on his lips and plump cheeks. His small eyes were made smaller by their heavy rim of black kohl. It took great restraint not to laugh at him. She could imagine that amusement would be her death warrant. Nero pointed to her.

"Who is this?"

Acté introduced Lysandra. "Imperial property, Caesar. I told you about her last night."

"Ah. I seem to remember. But I thought she was young." He searched for a word, nearsightedly looking her over. "Young and nubile. What are we to do with her?"

"When the time comes, General Maximian would like to buy her from the treasury, with your permission."

Although it infuriated Lysandra to think of being the property of the one man in the world she had once loved, this news aroused Nero's interest. "So Max wants to buy her." He waved his hand with the palm up, demanding, "My emerald, somebody."

Sporus offered him the large almond-shaped emerald on the end of a slender bar of gold. He peered through the emerald.

"Possibilities, perhaps. Send her to me after my concert. Now, I've no time."

He glanced at the papyrus held open for him by Cleophas, and read the large, carefully printed lines, moving his lips as

he did so. He seemed terrified, his hands shaking. Then he pushed aside Acté and Sporus, and rushed through the leather curtain and onto the stage, where a kneeling actor, also heavily made up, offered him his lyre.

Slaves laid leather-and-velvet curtains over their arms, and Acté and the others watched the rehearsal of Nero's great dramatic scene.

He did very little playing. The plucking of the lyre strings merely set the effect. But as an amateur singer he was better than Lysandra had expected, once she got over the sight of him. He would never be a professional. His pleasant tenor voice lacked power and authority. On the other hand, as an entertainer in a Palatine audience chamber, he might have been more than adequate.

Lysandra began to discover that more was expected of her than simply her presence. On every face around her was a degree of awe and admiration beyond her own acting ability. She forced her mouth open in a moist-lipped stare. It would have to serve. In spite of the emperor's pleasant voice, his singsong monologue, following the plaintive little tune that opened the scene, seemed to go on forever.

When he had sobbed Queen Dido's final farewell to the fickle, unseen Aeneas, Lysandra suspected that those witnesses around her had muscles as stiff and sore as her own. Nevertheless, when Nero completed his solo performance, careful not to upset his wig when he tore his hair, Lysandra was pushed out onto the stage along with the wildly enthusiastic Cleophas, Acté, Sporus, and the slavedressers.

Lysandra was still trying to think of some praise that would impress an emperor who had heard everything when Nero staggered toward her. He had been so moved by his own performance that his eye makeup was running, his eyes were filled with tears, and he could hardly see his way. Fumbling across the stage under the wave of shouts by his Greek audience, who seemed to have a genuine affection for him, he fell against Lysandra. He blinked, caught at her, and found his hand full of iris.

By the time Cleophas and Sporus had wrapped his sweating body in towels, Nero had begun to recover from his exertions, but he paid no attention to those around him. He had clutched the flowers until the light, blowsy heads fell to one side as their necks were broken.

"They brought me good luck. Who gave them to me?"

Acté gently pushed Lysandra forward. Nero said, "Closer."

wig over Nero's red hair, and the emperor tucked in stray locks.

"He is playing Queen Dido," Acté whispered, guessing Lysandra's thoughts. "This is where she weeps for the desertion of Aeneas. It is Nero's greatest scene."

The emperor heard this and smiled tremulously. "Pray for my success, Acté. Today will see my last performance in my beloved Greece. We leave tomorrow for Rome."

And about time, Lysandra thought. She wondered if he had any idea of his unpopularity in the capital.

But Nero was busy marveling at his own deep sensitivity. "Touch my hand, someone. Have you ever known my fingers so cold? The pressure grows worse with every performance. Suppose there comes a time when I can't better my own previous work."

His teacher, dressers, Spörtus, and Acté murmured in a chorus, "Never, Caesar. That time will never come. You are divinely inspired."

He peered at Lysandra, trying to get a clear look at her. He actually wore red color on his lips and plump cheeks. His small eyes were made smaller by their heavy rim of black kohl. It took great restraint not to laugh at him. She could imagine that amusement would be her death warrant. Nero pointed to her.

"Who is this?"

Acté introduced Lysandra. "Imperial property, Caesar. I told you about her last night."

"Ah. I seem to remember. But I thought she was young." He searched for a word, nearsightedly looking her over. "Young and nubile. What are we to do with her?"

"When the time comes, General Maximian would like to buy her from the treasury, with your permission."

Although it infuriated Lysandra to think of being the property of the one man in the world she had once loved, this news aroused Nero's interest. "So Max wants to buy her." He waved his hand with the palm up, demanding, "My emerald, somebody."

Sporus offered him the large almond-shaped emerald on the end of a slender bar of gold. He peered through the emerald.

"Possibilities, perhaps. Send her to me after my concert. Now, I've no time."

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he did so. He seemed terrified, his hands shaking. Then he pushed aside Acté and Sporus, and rushed through the leather curtain and onto the stage, where a kneeling actor, also heavily made up, offered him his lyre.

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Acté gently pushed Lysandra forward. Nero said, "Closer."

He peered at her, took her hand. "So it's my imperial property. You brought me luck. I need luck, with my sensitivity. Thank you."

She couldn't think of a single clever thing to say, but it didn't seem to matter. Nero let go of her hand and spoke to Acté. "You always bring me help and comfort when I need you, dearest friend." Under the eyes of his supporters he pulled her to him, kissed her forehead. She blushed with pleasure, but Lysandra noted that Nero's sexual intimacy seemed reserved for Sporus. He looked up at the big, handsome slave in quite a different way.

"I'll use the woman as one of my slaves in *Queen Dido's Lament*. She brought me luck, and it is only fair that I should reward her." It was as if he feared Sporus' jealousy and was explaining.

Sporus said nothing. But the rest of Nero's entourage couldn't say enough for the brilliance of the idea, since it was Caesar's. Lysandra found herself uneasily separated from Acté and being escorted to Nero's sybaritic quarters in the villa of Cleophas.

"For training in Ancient Greek Movement," as Nero explained.

Lysandra regarded Acté's final advice as a betrayal of their friendship. It proved that Acté had not been so altruistic after all in bringing her to Greece.

"Please, be kind to him. He needs us all these days." She added, deeply moved, "You may save Rome by bringing back the Nero we loved. Turn him from creatures like those who influence him now."

Shaking and afraid of this passionate advice, Lysandra saw herself deposited half an hour later in a warm room full of couches, plump cushions, lamps at midday, and all that the villa's owner could have collected to make his emperor happy. The thick oriental perfume in the air helped to provide an atmosphere of ancient Persian satraps or a Near Eastern brothel.

Female slaves serving the emperor fluttered around Lysandra, washing her hands and feet with rose water but, to her relief, making no effort to remove her gown. She prayed that they would remain, but they went out through the double doors, tittering. She could see two guards, who stood at attention. Just when the doors were closing, one of them looked in at her with a grin that inflamed all her pride.

They had placed her on a couch. She sat on the edge in

the most gingerly way. What if she fought off the master of the civilized world? There must be a terrible punishment for such an insult to the all-powerful Nero. She tried not to taste the bitterness of Acté's betrayal and to concentrate on the subject of Nero's performance this afternoon.

He was now dressed in a filmy yellow Greek chiton. This covered his heavy trunk. It was an aesthetic relief to Lysandra who caught glimpses of his flabby physique and marveled at the old gossip that it was one of the healthiest in Rome ten years ago.

He moved toward her across the heavily carpeted floor. He still had a light, athletic step, but his approach made her body stiffen with dread. Instead of throwing her back on the couch as the Roman soldier had done weeks ago, the emperor took her two hands and gently drew her up to stand before him. He looked her over, said, "You tremble. Are you so much in awe of me?"

She had the sense to stammer, "Yes, Caesar."

"Then you must think of me as Queen Dido, and you will pity me. Do I see tears in those big, black eyes? Eh?"

She blinked, trying desperately to summon water to her eyes. Her own fear and dread served her in this instance. He was satisfied and gave her further instructions.

"Crouch upon the floor. When I rend my garments, you throw your skirt over your face and touch the stage floor with your forehead."

"It would not be seemly, my lord Caesar. I wear nothing beneath this gown."

"Very true." His fat fingers examined her rib cage, then touched her groin and upper thighs through the wool dress. "You would distract attention from Queen Dido."

She seized this excuse in a hurry and knelt as he instructed her, bowing her head. Her black hair served as a curtain of mourning. The grace of her movements began to impress him, which had not been her intention. To her dismay, he stood there stroking the top of her head and murmuring, "I have always wished I understood how Aeneas felt in his last embrace with Dido, knowing he must desert her, for the sake of his own destiny. What a triumph, if I played both roles!"

She protested rapidly, "But no one plays Queen Dido as you do. Play her now for me, Caesar. Grant me this sublime pleasure."

"True. And so I shall. Later." He went down on his knees before her with a thud. He parted her hair to look into her

face, prompting her: "Your lover and master is leaving. Forever." He accepted her trembling as a part of her performance, "Our final goodbyes, my faithful queen. How she loved me! Or Aeneas, I should say. You see before you Aeneas, future founder of Rome. You adore him, but destiny is stronger. You offer your last throw of the dice. Your body."

"No," she whispered, dry-mouthed. She shrank from his groping hands. He wanted her to see the face of Aeneas, cruel and ambitious, willing to sacrifice his love for a dim future. Strangely enough, the picture he summoned to her imagination was that of General Maximian, a man that her mind and emotions hated. And she reminded herself she would rather be dead than surrender to Maximian.

He was a picture far different from this fat, perspiring "actor" when he crawled toward her on his knees, shifting her light body under his until his knees were between her legs. He paused, considering in what mood the sexual act might have been played between two lovers, about to part forever.

"Gently," he mused after an interminable minute during which Lysandra felt her own flesh creep. She found it impossible to struggle against his dead weight, and a part of her stood off and thought: He is the ruler of the world, and he is making love to you. Have you considered the *honor*? She had not.

But Acté would be happy. Evidently Lysandra was serving her purpose, arousing this man who had known every physical pleasure, so that he might now return to the first of them, a female.

"Yes," he repeated. "Aeneas would be gentle, but ever the godlike master of this woman who loved him beyond all living without him."

The inexorable entry of her body was a curious anticlimax. She had stiffened her muscles against the male force of the man she had dreamed of. Not against this softness, the great, flabby evidence of Nero's growing impotence. She closed her body around him deliberately, picturing the disappointment of Maximian, who would like to have been the first to invade her. Now he would not be the second or—she shuddered—perhaps even the tenth.

Nero felt the shudder through her body and was delighted. He had produced his first genuine sexual effect upon a woman in many months.

When he drew away from her and began to rearrange his

clothing, he was wildly anxious to reconsider his playing of the role.

"I must remember your reaction, *carissima*, and play the part exactly as you received my embrace today. That lovely, orgasmic thrill that passed through your body. I know I can imitate it. I must. It will be my last gift to Greece for this year. Run along to the baths now, and send Sporus to me. I've finished with you."

She got to her feet, briefly made herself presentable, and went out. This horror was over, and she still lived, unchanged. How ridiculous of men to be so easily satisfied!

She had nothing to say to Acté when they met at noon dinner, nor afterward as they walked over to the now crowded amphitheater, but she found it strange that Acté made no excuses or apologies. Only in the little makeshift dressing room when Acté made up Lysandra's face and brushed her hair for the role of Mourning Woman, Acté came close to expressing her real emotions.

"You may see what you have done for him, child. He is so much more confident. His performances terrify him, and he needs reassurance. He needs to know that he is loved."

"And what does *he* give for all this love he receives?"

"A precious gift. Dependence, child. He depends on us."

Rather like a huge, fat, ugly infant, thought Lysandra. But there was always an Acté to love these repulsive infants.

Lysandra had gotten over her anger by the time the performance began. In spite of finding one more ravisher among these Romans, she knew now that if she was forced to it, she could still bargain with her body. And every time she did so, Maximian would feel the flick of another disappointment. He still desired her. She had seen the look in his eyes that night at Acté's farm. It was her greatest satisfaction.

She heard an excited buzz below the stage and pushed aside the nearest velvet curtain held up by two giant Nubians. A powerful, ugly legion officer of middle age was walking across stones and grass just below the stage. Several ancient high-backed stone chairs had been placed in front of the stage, and the officer's aides hurried to point out the chair in the center. The big officer paid no attention, took the chair next to the one they laboriously pointed out, and sat down, adjusting his short sword to dangle between his sturdy legs and against his bare right knee. With an impatient hand, he waved away these sycophants and settled back, yawning widely.

Lysandra remarked to Acté, "What an odd man to be an officer! One would think he was a mere legionary. Maybe a decurion. But never—"

"Imperator of the Roman Legions of the East."

Lysandra gaped at him. "He can't be. Not General Max's beloved Vespasian."

"None other. Nero's most loyal commander."

Lysandra still found it hard to imagine that this stern plebeian with his square, toughened body was more powerful than patricians like Galba, Otho, or the fat glutton Vitellius, who had two legions on the Rhine and longed to be emperor of Rome. All of these men were aristocrats. Only this Vespasian, of the Flavian family, was a commoner. And only Vespasian, with his brilliant generals Titus and Maximian, remained loyal. In spite of Lysandra's revulsion against the absurd emperor, she couldn't help admiring Vespasian's loyalty.

Several slave musicians appeared on the stage and squatted at the deep rear of the stage beneath the scarlet backing. A hush engulfed the crowded hillside. The musicians began to play Nero's *Lament* on their instruments, the long-handled string cithara, a lyre with which the player used a plectrum to pick the strings, a horn bucina, twisted like an elongated shell, and cymbals to punctuate the great moments of Nero's musical composition.

Someone nudged Lysandra. She wandered out onto the stage in front of the musicians, blindly wavered, and then knelt. She had no idea what she was supposed to do, but remembered that she was one of Queen Dido's maids, mourning her queen's tragedy. Paying little attention to the audience, she suited her own ideas to the scene, surprised at her indifference to a public performance. After her sexual experiences with total strangers, she found the exhibition of her fully clothed body in front of this audience to be quite in the normal run of things. But she hadn't long to be creative. Nero burst upon the stage to enormous shouts, applause, and whistles. If he had this much support in Rome, Lysandra thought, there would be no revolt by Otho and Galba and the Pig Vitellius.

She sat as she had been told, head bowed, but studied the rapt audience to keep from falling asleep as Nero began his solo and continued interminably. The audience remained attentive, occasionally calling out praise, murmuring its approval. A Roman audience would long since have fallen asleep or walked out.

Suddenly she realized that one of the Roman soldiers in the stone chairs had likewise fallen asleep. His big, close-cropped head on one side, his mouth open, General Vespasian, imperator of the Legions of the East, had committed a sin that Lysandra was certain Nero would not forgive. He had been bored by the emperor's musical genius.

Lysandra owed nothing to Vespasian. On the contrary, he was Ancaris' natural father, and Lysandra had no more implacable enemy than she. But he was human, a loyal soldier, and it was commonly said, the greatest administrator in the East. She longed for someone to nudge him awake, but his aides were leaning forward, apparently trying to catch the emperor's eye and show how moved they were.

Nero's voice rose in a wail of anguish, Dido lamenting, but as he made a three-quarter turn he frowned at Lysandra, who had made the mistake of watching him instead of playing her part. She bowed her head, letting her hair fall in a curtain between her face and the audience.

A curious little sound reached her. A snore. Seconds later, an ear-piercing shriek snapped her head up. The shriek came from Nero. His puffy face mottled with natural color between the makeup, he extended a shaking arm toward Vespasian.

"You sleep. Is this your devotion to your emperor? I bare my soul and you sleep like a snoring fishmonger! And you call yourself my loyal friend." Lysandra had never seen Nero in a tantrum. It was terrifying because of his power, but sickening as a spectacle of a spoiled, screaming infant. "Traitor! Arrest him!" He seemed to be on the verge of a fit.

He swung around, took two or three steps, and grabbed Lysandra by a handful of hair.

"You saw! I was wringing their hearts! And he would not even listen!"

"B-but, Caesar," she began, improvising frantically, sure that her own last moment had come. "You transported the general. You have hypnotized him. We are helpless against these . . ." She searched and found words to soothe him. "... these raging emotions you unleash for us."

It was only when his fingers released her hair that her scalp felt sore from the pressure, and by that time she was too relieved to notice such trivial aches and pains. Acté had rushed out on the stage, followed timidly by Sporus. Tears ran down Acté's face. She kissed Nero's nervous, flexing fingers.

"Master, you cannot know how you move us. Your own power blinds you to your gifts. It was not the imperator's

fault that you transported him to other worlds, but you see how contrite he is."

To Lysandra's eyes the burly Vespasian looked anything but contrite. He was angry. But nudged by his companions, he saluted Nero.

"Transported is the word, Caesar. You have that effect on people."

Lysandra held her breath. It seemed to her that the soldier had been ironic, but luckily, Nero believed what he wanted to hear. He took long, deep breaths, leaning on Acté's slender shoulder as she wiped his sweating face.

"Yes, yes," he agreed finally, to the profound relief of his audience. Some of them might have wished Vespasian dead for various jealous reasons, but not one of them wanted Nero's temper to remain unleashed. It might strike at them as lightning strikes, without reason.

Nero stumbled to the front of the stage, helped by Sporus and Acté. He leaned down, peered anxiously into Vespasian's face. The soldier withstood this gaze without emotion. Nero held out his hand. "I was wrong to exhibit so much power. Dear friend, I didn't intend to transport you to that bitter, tragic world of Queen Dido. You are forgiven. And I trust you will forgive me."

"Gladly, Caesar," Vespasian agreed. He took the arm extended to him and clasped the emperor's wrist in friendship.

Anxious to make amends to this unfortunate victim of his emotional power, Nero added, "I wish you might come with me to Rome. Acté tells me there are new conspiracies against me by that accursed Senate."

"Give me the word and I'll come and root out their damned treason, Caesar."

Nero was still shaken after his recent rage, but giving the proposal a little thought, he reluctantly refused.

"We owe it to all the subject countries that wish to become citizens. You must clean up those Parthian desert raiders. Otherwise, why should Syria and Judea look to us for help in defending them? So send the raiders back across the Euphrates where they belong."

Vespasian saluted. "At your order, Caesar."

Much relieved that all the vibrations around him were now friendly, Nero signaled his musicians, and amid the thunderous, self-serving applause of his audience, he repeated Queen Dido's farewell from start to finish.

Long afterward, when she remembered this day, Lysandra

hardly thought of that brief sexual assault upon her by the master of the civilized world. It involved only her own degradation, and she could afford to forgive Nero when she remembered what followed. In refusing to let Vespasian and his legions accompany him to Rome, Nero had made his costliest mistake. It brought him inevitably to that night at Phaon's farm, with a poniard in his breast.

PART THREE:

Chapter One

During the months after Nero's suicide, Claudia Acté remained the protector and guardian of the imperial slave called Sandra. In Rome, only an hour's ride from Acté's little villa farm, the imperial office had become a bloodstained prize for the gambler who bid highest, stabbed deepest, and was in control of the nearest legion.

The efforts of the Praetorian Guards to present Sandra to their newly chosen Emperor Galba had fallen through, due in part to Galba's age and even more to the respect in which Claudia Acté was held by all who knew her. As a result, no effort had been made to take Sandra from her protection. But rumors flew across the Campania, and every day Sandra came in with some new story of political turmoil.

During the winter when the city was normally engrossed in the Saturnalia celebrations, Acté reminded Sandra, "This tragic fight for the empire is to your advantage, child. Otho wants to be emperor, but General Galba was his senior officer in Hispania. I'm afraid only Galba's death will bring Otho to power. And up on the Rhine River the fat one they call Vitellius—"

"The Pig."

"Yes. He also wants to be emperor. None of them has time to claim imperial properties."

Acté's calm, unemotional survey was terribly near the truth. Early in the new Year Acté and Sandra heard the garbled news from young Theron, sent by Daphne, mistress of that ambitious aristocrat Otho. Old Emperor Galba, who had succeeded Nero almost without his own volition, had

been set upon and stabbed to death in the Forum by Otho's order and now, as Theron put it, "Emperor Otho's redhead whore, Daphne, she says to tell you they treat her like an empress, all but the ladies. You're to come and visit the Palatine."

Acté was noncommittal, but Sandra refused in what amounted to a panic. She had just come from the yard with a handful of duck eggs which were to be traded to the farm of the freedman Phaon, in exchange for several fresh fish brought up from Ostia that very day.

"Theron, you know what a frightful creature Helios is. I won't go near the Palatine unless I am dragged there."

He understood, but shrugged off her fears. He had grown in the last year, but had not lost the cocky confidence with which he seemed to have been born. He went away with her refusal, and she and Acté returned to their quiet farm life.

Sandra was relieved of her greatest fear, but as a city-bred girl, she confessed to herself that there was an incredible boredom about this life. She didn't really mind the hard work, because it was her only way of paying back her patroness and savior, but much of her time she spent alone, since Acté's servants were given to prayer and good works when they weren't off drinking on their holidays, and they provided neither conversation nor games nor music to help Sandra liven the empty hours. Acté herself went out more and more, especially at night, to attend mysterious religious meetings in houses far out on the Ostian Way.

When Sandra asked her once what went on in these meetings, Acté said quietly, "I pray to God for the repose of Nero's soul, and the forgiveness of his sins."

What god this was, Acté did not say, but Sandra had never heard of one powerful enough to forgive *all* of the late emperor's sins.

Sometimes during this lonely farm life Sandra dreamed of Maximian. She knew he had been wounded in the desert of southern Syria, but had recovered rapidly, which did not please the Palatine, according to her gossip informant Theron. No one on the Palatine wanted to hear anything but silence and obedience from the powerful Vespasian and his men. Both Galba and Otho had known that if Vespasian ever marched on Rome, their little power, based on a handful of Praetorian Guards, would evaporate.

Sandra herself was surprisingly upset by the possibility of Maximian's death. She told herself this was because she

wanted to have him return to see what he had made of the virginal Gallic princess he once seemed to care for.

At the end of March, Otho had been emperor for two months, holding the position only because Vitellius the Pig and his Rhine legions had not yet reached Rome, and because the emperor Vespasian in the East was busy fighting the nation's battles. When Theron arrived this time Sandra carefully considered Daphne's invitation to visit her. As Theron pointed out, "Otho the Peacock, they're calling him. The Peacock against the Pig. Otho can't last. He has only a few cohorts of the legion back of him, besides the Praetorian Guards that put him in when he had old Galba murdered."

"Not a very pretty picture," Sandra remarked.

But Acté was her usual compassionate self. "I wonder if Otho actually knew his men were going to murder poor General Galba."

Without being asked, Theron gave it flatly as his opinion, "He knew. But the city didn't like it. They're not going to defend him; so he's going off up north with his men to fight the Pig tomorrow. That's why his friends are all celebrating tonight. To cheer him on."

"And the minute he leaves town he will have no friends."

Acté reproved her. "Sandra, how cynical you've grown!"

Theron proceeded to the gist of the matter. "Anyway, red-head Daphne's just ordered General Max's wife to show herself at the banquet. Daphne says the general's wife insulted her and you, and Daphne wants to humble her now. It'll be the first time Lady Ancaris has left Max's house in Pompeii since she was sick. Things aren't too healthy for anybody that belongs to the emperor's family or his legions right now. They know on the Palatine that if they don't move fast, this Ancaris and her father and her family are going to come back from the East and take over Rome. That's why Otho's got to get rid of the Pig first, so he can have the power to get rid of Vespasian."

"Through assassination, as he got rid of Galba?"

Theron was matter-of-fact. "Well, Galba let them kill Nero. It's only fair. At first everybody thought Lady Ancaris was staying in Pompeii because she was scared of being a hostage for her father. But that was before she had the baby."

Even Acté was surprised at that. Lysandra gasped. She felt crushed, as if a heavy load had fallen upon her, and she didn't understand why for a few seconds.

"You mean to say that Ancaris and Maximian have a child?"

"Born in late November. It's all been pretty quiet. But Daphne's spreading the story that the boy maybe isn't Max's. Nobody believes her, though. And if things get bad with Otho or whoever is emperor, they've got a hostage with Ancaris and her baby."

Gods! thought Sandra. He even lied about that.

Maximian had told her, with that frankness she wanted so desperately to believe, that he and Ancaris were no longer man and wife, that she had affairs with half of Lutetia; yet he had apparently made no effort to disclaim the child.

"Of course," she said aloud, trying not to show her deep shock or its cause. "Remember, Acté, how bad she looked when she came here the night before we left for Greece? She was pregnant then, and with his child."

Acté reminded her, "But Lady Ancaris spoke of some knowledge, some weapon that would hold Max forever. Thanks to her father's power, I think she said. Perhaps the child was her weapon."

This didn't make Sandra any happier. She ventured hopefully, "Still, it may not be Maximian's child."

"He don't deny it," Theron pointed out.

But Acté pursued the matter, defending Maximian for some reason. "If Lady Ancaris had this child in adultery, then that fact alone could destroy her if the emperor chose to turn public opinion against her. Whoever the father of the boy may have been, General Max would not want his wife shamed and perhaps destroyed. And as for the child, God only knows what would become of it if Max denied parentage."

A trap. Every way she looked at it, Sandra saw a trap that would hold Maximian to his adulterous wife.

"Now will you come to the Palatine as Daphne's guest?" Theron went on. "She's got nobody she can count on, she says. Those patrician ladies, they don't treat her the way she thinks is proper. So she needs you for a few days. She told me to tell you."

Acté prompted her, "It would be a kindness."

"But the danger. I don't want to fall into Helios' hands, or any of those creatures serving Otho." Nor did she want to "serve" Otho himself as Daphne served him. But she felt Daphne would help her in that quarter. And it would be a

change of scene to return to the Palatine in triumph as the friend of the emperor's mistress.

Theron was much disappointed when Sandra rode into Rome with him wearing a plain gown and travel cloak that would have disgraced a farm slave. She had a perfect explanation, which was not her real one.

"What else should I wear, riding in a wagon drawn by a mule?" She added quickly, "But it is far better than walking, and I appreciate it."

He grinned. "Anyway, it's mine. I bought it with what Helios pays me."

She started to jump off the wagon. "Theron! You aren't taking me to Helios."

"Of course not. I know you don't like him. Though I don't know why. Daphne says he's all right if you keep him in his rightful place."

"He is a horror. Inhuman. He made me feel like—like a piece of meat on a hook."

Theron shrugged. "Females usually like him. He has powers. Daphne says he hypnotizes them with his eyes and his voice because he hasn't got the male powers. And females do what he tells them."

"Here is one who doesn't."

"Me either. But he pays real well. That's the thing. If you're a servant like me. Or a slave like you. If you weren't owned by the emperor, you could earn enough money to buy yourself."

"If. If. If. Don't talk about it." It was all nonsense anyway. Even if she had a single owner, there was only one way she could earn enough to buy her freedom, and she hadn't Daphne's ability to use her body to its best advantage. There were times when she envied Daphne.

Theron was not the only one who urged her to sell what they regarded as essentially merchandise. The minute her one-time slave girl, Daphne, met her in the labyrinthine palace on the Palatine, she pointed out the difference in their present situations.

"*Carissima*. Dear friend!" she cried as she and Sandra embraced. "Here at last to see me in my triumph. Did you ever think, back when your papa bought me in the marketplace at Massilia, that I'd rise so high?"

"You deserve it, Daphne. You've worked hard to be where you are." She flushed at this unfortunate remark, apologized hurriedly. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I only—"

"But Sandra, it's true. Gods! What I could tell you about pleasing an emperor! I am a mass of scars. And I leave it to you to imagine what my insides are like. But look at me."

Sandra stood back, studied the girl from head to foot. The thin-skinned redhead complexion had coarsened under its constant applications of heavy paint and powder, and the plump, sensual body was already running to fat. Obviously she yielded to the temptations offered at the many banquets Otho gave. But her gown was flame-colored silk and gauze, almost the shade of her thick, curly hair, which she still wore clustering around her cheeks and neck in the old way of her girlhood. She was so covered with jewelry she jingled as she moved. She swung around proudly.

"At least he's generous. I'll say that for Otho. The wretched Peacock."

"Daphne, be careful!" Sandra looked around nervously, but Theron had led her to Daphne's own bedchamber, formerly that of Nero's third wife, where the Harlot Empress, as Romans now called her, was alone.

"Don't worry, Sandra. I'd never let my slave women hear me. Did you know a slave can own a slave? Anyway, they creep onto the Peacock's couch every time he lies down. Trying to take my place. But they won't. I still know a few tricks."

Sandra couldn't help laughing. "You will always know a few tricks, my Lady Daphne. You saved me from Helios once. I'll never forget that."

"Oh. That was nothing. I've taken rather a fancy to the eunuch, though. At least he doesn't want to get inside me. When I feel depressed or tired, or those patrician women hurt my feelings, I let Helios work on my mind. You don't know all his powers."

"I can imagine. What I can't imagine is you ever being despondent." Sandra hugged the girl, and Daphne seemed pathetically pleased by the attentions of a friend from the past. Or perhaps Sandra was just that odd creature, a woman she could trust.

Eager to make Sandra as prosperous as she was, Daphne began at once to hint that certain senators would pay handsomely for Sandra's company, during those seasons when their wives were off at the family villa in Antium or Baiae. "And we simply must get you into some decent clothes."

Sandra laughed. "Indecent, you mean. Now think, Daphne.

Do you want me wandering around half naked, trying to entice all these friends of yours?"

Thus reminded of Otho's predilection for sensual women, Daphne agreed, adding, "But the way you are, you can be safe from those men. I'll just say you're my body-slave. And—oh, Sandra—" She clapped her hands. "I've commanded that precious blonde bitch, Lady Ancaris, to be present. *Commanded!* Otho wants to see her and discover if she's worth holding as a hostage in case Vespasian gets ambitious for the throne."

"I thought Otho's enemy was Vitellius, the glutton from the Rhine."

"Naturally. Otho says he must get rid of one enemy at a time; so he's going after the Pig tomorrow. But Sandra, remember how nasty Ancaris was in Lutetia, and when she visited us at the inn in Lugdunum? What joy to pay her back tonight!"

Sandra shared some of that exuberant taste for revenge, but every thought of that evil woman was clouded by the biting knowledge that she had borne a child to Maximian.

"She has a little boy four months old," Daphne went on. "I've made up my mind to look that baby over with the greatest care. I'll lay you a thousand sesterces the child isn't Max's. Won't it be fun to prove it, and disgrace the whole family? You said after that soldier raped you in Gaul that you wanted to disgrace Max and Ancaris. Although," she added, upon consideration, "I don't think that poor soldier did you any harm. You were awfully old then to be a virgin."

"Can we talk about something else?"

Daphne bubbled with excitement again, promising her as they left the stiffly elegant chamber, "You are going to meet an old friend tonight. He had a bad stab wound in the back. But General Max sent four soldiers all the way up to Gaul to find him, and he's here, safe and sound. You remember dear old Enobarbus? Would you believe it? He still likes me. He almost made Otho jealous yesterday."

Sandra remembered another man who had been similarly taken with Daphne. "The big Libyan who worked for that wretched slave dealer, El Kedar. He mourned for you all the way to Rome. But I suppose, in your present splendor, you despise such devotion," she teased.

As ever, Daphne was practical. "You never know when you may need someone. I'm glad to know the Libyan might

be useful. Always keep your friends, Sandra. This is a chancy world."

A chancy world, indeed. Sandra had been a slave for more than a year; yet in her heart, she still felt all the pride and arrogance of that ignorant young Lady Lysandra who had come riding into Lutetia in an expensive carriage with five guards, and never truly asked herself where her father, a poor scribe, could have come by such a fortune. She told herself she deserved her fate. She had been incredibly stupid. Daphne was the wise one.

Meanwhile, there was excitement about the prospect of seeing Maximian's wife brought down a few steps from her evil triumphs of the past. But in spite of the indignity it would bring to Ancaris, Sandra found herself hoping the woman's baby would not be brought to the Palatine as a pawn in the humiliation of its mother.

She found one great satisfaction as soon as she and Daphne walked into one of the great marble halls of the palace. Her onetime body-slave, Daphne, was smothered by well-wishers, both male and female, honey-talking sycophants, and even the noble senators. Their wives were conspicuously absent. Daphne whispered to Sandra, "Funny thing is, I could bed any and all of their husbands. I've had offers enough. The old bitches ought to thank me instead of piling scorn on me . . . why, Senator Balbus, how good to see you here! Only last week when Emperor Otho made sacrifice on the Capitoline Hill, your good wife told me that you were much too busy to come to one of the emperor's Palatine dinners."

The stout senator bowed over her hand.

"Dear—er—lady, my wife doesn't always speak for me. Not being informed on all my moves, as you might say."

There were a dozen more just like Senator Balbus.

On the other hand, Sandra was astonished at the difference she found in Emperor Otho since those strutting, conceited days of the ambitious hopeful who had bought Daphne from El Kedar only a little over a year ago in Ostia. He was once more in the audience chamber where Sandra and the boy Theron had seen Otho and other men of senatorial rank talking treason a year ago. Today he looked thinner, with haunted eyes and hands that shook as he drank deep from a polished copper goblet and held it out automatically, without even looking toward the half-naked female slave who refilled it. He was surrounded by men either asking favors or trying to instill in him even more fears.

"Divine Caesar, you must beware of the man you leave behind you to keep Rome in order. He must be carefully chosen."

"Most divine Otho, I have heard that Vitellius and his two Rhine legions may gain the support of the eastern imperator, Vespasian."

Otho drank again, sprinkling the senator with wine. His toupee was on crooked and Sandra longed to straighten it, but how did you tell a lord of the world that his hair was not on quite straight? Otho dismissed the latest gossip. "A lie. Vespasian is loyal. He was loyal to Nero and Galba. He will be loyal to me. If not, we have his daughter and his new grandson. He'll never dare to betray me."

While Daphne edged through the group to console him by her presence, Sandra overheard the buzz of gossip around her and realized none of these supposed friends and supporters of Salvius Otho had any confidence in his future. Two of them, a knight and a senator, were making bets on how long it would take the Pig Vitellius to defeat this Peacock Otho if it came to a pitched battle.

"And I'll give you odds that Vespasian's armies could destroy both of them."

Mighty Rome had fallen low. Sandra was turning away when she collided with a gnarled old soldier who winced and then greeted her enthusiastically.

"Lady Lysandra! Remember me? Enobarbus. General Max's man."

"I recall you very well, centurion. You were to bring me safely to Rome, I think you said. And then, was it a drunken brawl that cost you your wound?"

He grinned, rubbed his back, and winced again. "I didn't have a chance to get drunk. Wouldn't have anyway. Not on a mission. No. Somebody stuck a knife back here. Missed the vital parts but just barely. I couldn't walk for months. Luckily, General Max's men came for me and I got back to the army."

"Lady Ancaris says it was you who got drunk, broke your leg, and turned me over to the slaver El Kedar. Is that true?"

For the first time he hesitated. "Even if it wasn't true, Lady Lysandra, you'd never get me to say anything against the general's family. I'll be saying goodbye now. Got to be on my way. I'm due at Max's Antioch headquarters early in April. Max's men say he's not too happy about what's been going on here since he got his own wound. They said he was

going to look into it for Vespasian as soon as they get the Parthians out of Syria. That wouldn't be long. So I'm off."

A small matter to that faithful soldier Enobarbus, and she urged him to go at once. Whether he was directly responsible for Lysandra's fate by his own clumsiness or merely following the orders of Ancaris, he represented part of the horror Sandra had undergone, and she was relieved when he left her.

Daphne sent a slave to bring Sandra back to her. Like Otho, she didn't seem to trust any of her fawning Palatine visitors. By the time the banquet began in a big hall of the old palace, Sandra understood her role. Daphne was undoubtedly fond of her, but a sense of self-preservation, very natural in the circumstances, was also involved. She gestured for Sandra to walk directly behind her as she moved along through the crowd of guests with a daring senatorial wife or mistress beside her.

There was nothing unfair about Sandra's treatment by her onetime slave, but Sandra couldn't help noting that in spite of Daphne's exuberant greeting to Sandra when they met, things were very different at the banquet. Sandra stood just behind Daphne to offer napkins, spoons, and knives and to pour wine for her when she held out her goblet in imitation of her master, Emperor Otho.

Sandra obeyed all instructions, trying to oblige Daphne in every way. Serving at a public dinner was far less degrading than her earlier experiences in this palace under the command of her "master" Helios. But as the new guests were ushered in to be parceled out among the couches grouped in threes around each delicate little inlaid table, she became more and more curious to see Maximian's wife in this new situation. Her hatred of Maximian abated, and she wondered what it would be like to know that the general was her husband, the man with whom she had slept and created a child, the heir to General Max's genius. She banished this traitorous thought quickly. She recognized a part of her hatred for Ancaris as pure jealousy.

The early courses of the dinner had already been served, the stuffed eggs and lettuce, oysters, mushrooms, and snails, when Otho raised one jeweled forefinger to slaves at the great double doors. They bowed, opened both doors, and two magnificent Nubians ushered in the fragile, golden figure of the Lady Ancaris, looking haughty but unafraid.

Sandra envied the woman in many ways—for her husband,

and his son, and most of all, for her poise at this moment. Ancaris wore gold-threaded silk and a stolla of the same glittering material, which seemed to be her uniform. Even her sandals dazzled the beholder.

Sandra was surprised to hear the cool criticism buzzed around her. Perhaps these sycophantic friends of Otho hoped to win some reward from him when they remarked on the woman.

"Skinny as a wagon pole."

"Arrogant bitch."

"Wife of Maximian Claudius. Daughter of Vespasian. What can you expect?"

Daphne, lying on a couch between a senator and her master, Emperor Otho, looked up at Sandra standing beside her without expression. Daphne winked.

But her triumph had little effect on Ancaris. Sandra gritted her teeth. Ancaris showed no sign of humiliation as the Nubians escorted her toward the last couch at the far end of the room. It was impossible to achieve a triumph over a woman who refused to lose a shred of her arrogant confidence.

Emperor Otho, now drunk, waved his hand languidly, and stopped the Nubians and their unacknowledged prisoner as they passed his couch.

"Hail, Ancaris. We take it as a compliment that our faithful servant, General Maximian Claudius, leaves his wife in our care."

"Your generous concern for my family is well known, Caesar." She moved closer to him before her guards could stop her, saying in her sleek, purring voice, "Dear Otho, I do believe you are more handsome than ever. Power is good for you."

Ancaris looked up from Otho's head to Sandra behind the imperial pair. Her golden eyes narrowed. She ignored Daphne's uncontrolled giggle.

"Power and the love of my devoted subjects," Otho reminded Ancaris, slapping Daphne's plump little backside. He stirred and added suddenly, "I am reminded of something I intend to do tomorrow morning before I march north with my loyal legions."

Others in the triclinium exchanged looks that appeared dubious to Sandra. Otho's "loyal legions," fresh from Palatine service and the pleasant, peacetime life of Rome, were no match for battle-hardened legionaries used to constant skirmishes with the Germanic tribes east of the Rhine. Though

these Rhine legions were commanded by the notorious glutton Vitellius, he was a professional soldier, with more experience than Otho.

Otho must have sensed the doubts of his fellow diners. He took another drink and went on with false euphoria, "I shall set free this faithful young companion of my glory." He nudged Daphne. "The Lady Daphne will be a freedwoman by this time tomorrow."

Everyone rushed around in a babble of congratulations to Daphne, and no one was more sincerely glad than Sandra. Daphne remembered to hug her and whisper, "You see, Sandra? It was all worth it." Whatever that might mean.

Ancaris, meanwhile, shifted her slight weight from one foot to the other until Daphne waved off her well-wishers and kissing the emperor, teased him, "My love, master of the world, you promised I might see the child."

Somewhat bleary-eyed, Otho agreed. "By all means. You have brought the infant with you to the Palatine, my lady?"

Ancaris' lips tightened, but she did not make the mistake of showing her anger. "You were gracious enough to wish to see our son, excellency. My maid, Zostra, is caring for him in the apartment you provided."

Otho tried to get up, fell back, and suggested, "Daphne, go and see the child and report to me. I am curious to know if the boy is as handsome as his father. Our loyal General Max." He cocked an eyebrow at her. "He is loyal to us, my lady?"

"Of course. You are the Caesar now."

Behind her, Sandra heard the sinister remark repeated by several of Otho's male guests: "The Caesar now. But for how long?"

Her personal dislike of Otho had faded under his benign indifference to her and his generosity toward Daphne. His political crimes were not her affair, and she couldn't help despising the men who ate his food, accepted his gifts, fawned on him, and behind his back hinted at his destruction.

Daphne caught Sandra's eye. "Come along. Guard my back. I don't trust these honey-sweet friends."

Sandra obeyed, more and more convinced that Daphne was no fool.

The little procession, mostly women, rustled along the wide corridors, between columns already beginning to chip and fade, until they reached the two chambers assigned to the wife of General Maximian. The rooms were old-fashioned

and somewhat austere, having once been used by the great Augustus, but the focal point of the inner bedchamber was the cradle of the child.

"What do you call him?" Daphne asked, deliberately offensive, since Max's child had already been given his proper name.

The ancient Persian, Zostra, raised the sleeping child from a tiny cradle with gilt scrollwork and a gilt Eagle of Rome upon its headboard. The child opened the blackest eyes most of the witnesses had ever seen. He grinned at them, capturing all feminine hearts immediately. Zostra presented the baby:

"Lucius Flavius Claudius. Named for his father, and for his grandfather, the great Vespasian of the Flavian House. He has his grandmother's eyes, has he not?"

"Ohs and ahs hid Daphne's private comment to Sandra.

"Neither Ancaris nor General Max has black eyes. And Ancaris' mother had brown eyes." She caught her breath, nudged Sandra. "But the baby is the clear image of someone. Do you see the resemblance?"

The pretty little face was hauntingly familiar. Like someone Sandra had loved. The knowledge came to her with the force of a blow to the stomach. The boy was her father, Perseus, in miniature.

Enobarbus said General Max might be coming to Rome, presumably by stealth, to spy out the political situation for his commander, Vespasian. What would he feel when he saw a child so much like the man he had condemned to suicide? He would certainly know then that Sandra had told him the truth about his wife's involvement with Perseus.

She stared at the child, trying to fight off a fatal weakness. She did not want to like the beautiful little boy. But the resemblance drew her, in spite of his mother. He was Sandra's own blood relation. The last she had in the world.

Chapter Two

The happiness of seeing Daphne's manumission the next day at the big records hall on the Capitoline Hill was slightly blurred for Sandra by the emperor's casual remark as he saw her among the enthusiastic witnesses.

"We must do something about our imperial property when I return. We have at least two dozen slaves not yet sold, and if we are faced with war, we may need every obol. Our Sandra will then have her own chance to earn her freedom. Don't worry, my dear. We'll find some loyal subject anxious to obtain what I have received from my Daphne. Suppose I ask Helios to look around for just such an owner."

Sandra prayed that he would forget this generosity, but as she and Daphne's other slaves were descending the Capitoline steps she caught sight of the tall, thin, white-clad figure on the edge of the crowd. Helios had heard the emperor's suggestion. She couldn't mistake his malign little smile. She tried to trust in Daphne's protection along with the moderating influence of Claudia Acté, but the doubts and fears remained.

It began to look as if her greatest hope lay in the return of General Max. At least he had recognized the injustice done to her when they had met last at Acté's farm.

An hour after the manumission of Daphne, Marcus Salvius Otho, emperor of Rome for two and a half months, marched off to do battle for his throne, accompanied by a few cohorts of the legion, and his Praetorian Guard, a small army of men, elegantly uniformed, sworn to protect their emperor, with a record of assassinating two emperors, betraying and driving another to suicide, and now expecting full payment if they won Otho's battle for him.

As she turned away from the Palatine's long east portico after the departure of Otho's triumphant "army," Sandra found herself almost sorry for this lord of the world.

In the next weeks, whenever Ancaris was elsewhere, visiting Roman friends, or at a banquet, Sandra made her way to

the baby Lucius Flavius, whom they were already calling "young Flavius." She always brought a small present, ostensibly from "the Harlot Empress" Daphne. Sandra had no money except the few sesterces paid to her for work on the villa farm, but it was worth every obol of her meager savings to see that her weak, foolish, charming father had left some memory of him in the living world.

Knowing that it would be wiser if she returned to Acté's farm permanently, she couldn't bring herself to stay there and went back to the proximity of Young Flavius. It was like losing her last tie with a member of her own family when she returned at night to the farm.

Daphne was also charmed by the child but didn't want to encourage Ancaris' pretensions. One day in the baths where Daphne received the attentions given a fully accredited empress, she asked Sandra confidentially, "What do you think is the real business between that woman and Helios, our eunuch chamberlain?"

Sandra stopped anointing the soft flesh of Daphne's legs with perfumed nard and looked toward the far end of the pool, where Ancaris and the eunuch had their heads together.

"She uses him to procure women for her brother when Domitian is in the city."

"I think it's more than that, Sandra."

Sandra's comment was heavy with contempt. "Not love, surely."

"No. No. Do be serious. . . . Rub there again. Between my shoulder blades now. A little to the right. Ah! That's nice. Keep massaging there." She sighed, long and sensuously, but kept her big eyes on the conspiratorial pair. "You know, I wouldn't be surprised if dear Ancaris was up to something. Maybe she's working against my Otho."

"For her father?"

"Maybe for the Pig, Vitellius. My poor Otho! I prayed for his success at the Temple of Mars this morning. On the other hand . . ." She turned over. "Breasts now. And then stomach. I'd have a male slave do this, but Otho doesn't approve. Besides, they always ask nasty little questions about my bruises. My battle scars, I call them."

"On the other hand?" Sandra prompted her.

"Oh, yes. Well, Vitellius is much more interested in food than in females, and he'd be a lot less rough on me than my poor Otho. So it really doesn't matter which of them wins the battle."

"Daphne!" The girl's total amorality still occasionally stunned Sandra. "Otho freed you. He gave you your jewels. Your position here."

Daphne scowled at the eunuch and his golden companion. "There's a rumor going around. I heard it on my way here to the baths. My Otho has met this Vitellius up north at the Po River. There was a battle going on. The Pig won it, so they said—and his legions are marching on Rome. It's just a rumor. The gods only know where these stories start. But if it's true, poor Otho is sure to be murdered. Keep massaging, Sandra. I wonder what I would have to do to keep the Pig happy."

"Daphne, you are impossible! Aren't you at all shocked at the prospect of four emperors in one year, and three of them dead by violence?"

"Well, dear, it's not my fault. And I've got to look after myself. No one else does."

Sandra couldn't argue with that. She understood Daphne's reasoning very well when Helios passed her on his way to the west portals of the palace. He was stopped briefly by Daphne.

"Have you heard any of the rumors, Helios? You have such powerful friends. Can you tell us how the battle will end?"

Helios bowed sinuously over her hand. "Dear lady, perhaps you would not like to know. My profound wishes for the success of Emperor Otho seem to have no effect upon my dreams. My nightmares, in fact."

"Bad?"

He made no answer to that. His shrug was clear enough. He reached out, fingered the modest neckline of Sandra's gown. She jerked away from his touch. This seemed to amuse him.

"Vitellius is very confident. Before this battle everyone talks about, he agreed that when he won, I should retain my post as chamberlain of the household slave population. Over eight hundred, at last count."

"Then you do think he might win?"

"I think it is well to be prepared for that eventuality. Perhaps I can act as a friend, between you and the new emperor." He added without haste, "In the shocking event that Vitellius wins."

"The Pig," Sandra put in.

"Not if he wins," Helios reminded her gently and went on his way.

After her dismissal by the content and somnolent Daphne, Sandra hurried back across the old palace to the chamber occupied by young Flavius. The baby knew her—less than a month, but his black eyes and chubby little hands held out to her were proof of that, as she remarked proudly to old Zos-tra. The Persian crushed such pretensions.

"He does it with everyone." This was her usual manner. She was intensely loyal to Ancaris and allowed no one to usurp the lady's rights and privileges. But today she was nervous as a cat and almost friendly. Instead of huddling over the good-natured baby like an ominous cloud, she got up and walked around the room, every once in a while staring out the window and shaking her head. She didn't even object when Sandra picked up the baby. Grateful for this baffling change, Sandra volunteered, "May I help you in any way? I know the Palatine pretty well after all these weeks."

"Likely. You've been here often enough. If my Lady Ancaris wasn't so busy trying to save the family by being nice in the right places, she'd be here instead of you."

Sandra ignored this. She was too busy clapping young Flavius' hands with hers and then boosting him up and down, to his delight. Sometimes he reminded her of the ease with which her father had been entertained (and fooled) by women. It seemed to Sandra that this helpless young Flavius would do anything for his own pleasure. The similarity between Flavius and the dead Greek, Perseus, twisted her heart. She was convinced after less than a month that the child's mother regarded her little son as a pawn. Sandra still wasn't sure how the child would serve Ancaris, but since the woman had cared nothing for Sandra's father and denied all knowledge of him, she might easily have managed an abortion. To other Roman patricians such an idea was not uncommon. So the child, Lucius Flavius, must serve some purpose. Sandra believed that purpose was to ensnare Maximian once more. Would he be such a fool as to accept this boy as his own?

For the sake of young Flavius, the seed of her own father, there were times when Sandra almost hoped Max would accept the child. At night, safe in Acté's little farmhouse, Sandra sometimes entertained a dream of rearing the bright, vivacious boy with the help of his adoptive father, General Max. Maximian would make a wonderful father for his own children. But for the child of an adulterous wife? Anyway, the dream was absurd. How could she dream so intimately of the

man who had betrayed her in Gaul with soft promises that destroyed her father?

And what about Ancaris in the meantime? Physically she was the child's mother. In her cool way she was even fond of the boy. It was sometimes hard to find an occasion to visit young Flavius without coming upon Ancaris.

The Persian woman was watching Sandra, her little dull-bead eyes undeniably desperate. A strange expression for the implacable woman. She cleared her throat several times, and Sandra took the hint. "Is there something you wish to say, Zostra?"

The old woman jumped at the offer. "You are leaving at once for the villa of Claudia Acté?"

Surprised, Sandra decided the woman was merely trying to get rid of her. "Soon, yes. Is young Flavius about to receive other visitors?"

"No." She couldn't resist a quick glance at the window. Scared, thought Sandra, who had never seen the woman frightened of anything. She seemed to be listening.

Below the Palatine the city was not its noisy self. Sandra found the old woman's fear contagious, and she began to think something was seriously wrong. She set young Flavius back in his cradle and went to the long windows. The city which spread out below and on every side of the Palatine was alive with people milling around, but they were strangely quiet and uneasy in their behavior.

Zostrá said roughly, "They say the soldiers of General Vitellius, him they call the Pig, will be arriving any hour."

Considering Daphne's connection with Otho, this was bad news indeed. Sandra would have to persuade the girl to get out fast. "How do you know?"

"Ask them." she tilted her skull-like old head toward the window. "Out in the streets, they know."

Sandra covered the child's body in a fringed blanket crusted with the seal of the Claudian House.

"Is the general's child safe?"

Zostrá hustled over to push the cradle away from her. "The child is a hostage. He and his mother are valuable to this new Emperor Vitellius."

"We don't know that he will be emperor. Otho was in power when he left Rome."

"The Lord Helios has ways of knowing."

So all the news, and much of the power, came from the

clever eunuch, as usual. Much as she loathed and feared Helios, she had no reason to doubt his sources of information.

Cold panic gripped her. She must warn Daphne first of all, but as she went quickly to the door the old woman called out hoarsely, "Wait. You must help us."

This was what the old Persian had been leading up to all the time she behaved so oddly. But Sandra pointed out, "I must hurry!"

"And will you let them murder General Vespasian's son Domitian? He has been in the city trying to discover the sentiments of the army."

"Well, they may have one more hostage. Too valuable to kill."

"The Lord Domitian has been here in disguise. A spy. I needn't tell you what the men of this Vitellius, this Pig, will do to him if he is caught."

That stopped Sandra. She slapped the door angrily. "A stupid thing to do. Anyone may recognize him." She had little doubt they would torture him to learn his father's plans, since Vitellius had only to eliminate the effete aristocrat, Otho, and command the world. With one exception. The emperor Vespasian with his able generals, Titus and Maximian, controlled the eastern half of the empire. Vespasian had remained loyal to Galba and Otho. Would his ambitions be smothered forever, or would he decide that he could do better than Vitellius and proceed to march on Rome?

Although the Civil War had been over for almost a hundred years, everyone living had heard tales of its horrors. Rome was terrified now, for fear Vitellius' men would massacre those in the city who had paid allegiance to Emperor Otho.

Sandra knew she had to work fast. The Palatine would be in an uproar as soon as word of Otho's defeat came through. Everyone who was closely bound to Otho must expect the worst.

"Where is Domitian?"

The old woman went into Ancaris' bedchamber. Without being asked, Sandra followed her. The young Domitian had been watching out the window, and he swung around, his sensitive good-looking features suspicious and narrow-eyed. His thin hand went to the dagger in his heavy leather belt. But at Sandra's smile he relaxed. Some of his tension left him.

"We must get you out of here, my lord."

He came to her eagerly, holding out his hand. She took it, closing her fingers on his wrist. At sight of her he seemed to have fresh optimism.

"Maybe I can say I came to visit my sister and the baby."

"But my lord, a son of the great Vespasian would not visit Rome secretly, without being received by Otho and the court. No. I'm afraid they will know why you are here. But they should never have sent you. You are a commander and too valuable."

"They didn't send me. Max is here secretly, trying to turn some of the Praetorians from Otho direct to Vespasian. He knows they have no love for the Pig. And he wants to see his son. He also has business with Helios."

"With Helios!"

"Anyways, Max is in greater danger than I am. And he made me swear I'd stay at Acté's farm. But I couldn't do that. I had to see Ancaris' baby. I didn't even know she and Max had slept together in Gaul. I must say, the baby doesn't look the least like him. But that's Ancaris' problem. While I was here I thought I could help. Find out those on the Palatine that remained loyal to Otho, and report to Max. He has to know how things are, how people feel about accepting the Pig."

"Then General Max is somewhere here in Rome?" She felt an added nervous excitement, knowing the danger to him, but thinking there might be an occasion when they would meet. Perhaps, after all, he could buy her as he had promised, and save her from Helios. She might hate Maximian for destroying her father and herself, but his ownership was better than her present state.

Domitian shook Sandra's arm. "I've found out. Otho was a patrician and well known. But they don't want Vitellius, the glutton from the Rhine. They'll fall into Father's lap like ripe apples."

"We'll talk about politics later. Meanwhile, we have to get you out of the Palatine." And there was Daphne, another problem. "Another person should be warned too." Ideas formed as she spoke. "I must get some clothing to disguise you a little more successfully." She had access to women's clothes through Daphne, if she was lucky, and that put her in mind of Nero. She had never thought she would profit by her grotesque experience with the late emperor. But his acting disguise as Dido showed her the way for the slender Domitian.

After another glance out the window, Domitian suggested, "I could go down through the Circus Maximus. Maybe no one would notice me. They're all wandering around like lost sheep. And I know the Palatine better than you do. I lived here."

"It needs only one person in Rome, my lord, to recognize you. And a year ago, when you lived here, you were seen by many people."

He was indignant. "I'm not afraid."

"Of course not. But we are. Rome needs Vespasian's family. Alive."

He was so pleased at what seemed her personal interest that he almost forgot his own danger. "Thank you. It's not easy for me to find friends. They always like Father and Titus, but I have to work and connive and plot to get friends."

"Perhaps you try too hard. Now, promise to wait."

"If you come back to me." He moved after Sandra and caught her around the hips, and while the Persian sniffed, an unwilling witness, he kissed the back of Sandra's neck.

She said sternly, "No nonsense. We have things to do." But she couldn't free herself for a few seconds.

He had grown within the year, and at nearly nineteen, he was much more confident. She was not repulsed, but she also felt some hysterical amusement at his behavior at such a time. He whispered in her ear, "When you become a blonde, my salt-sweet Sandra, you may have anything of me. If Father didn't have his infernal plans, I think I'd marry you." He slipped away the neckline of her old wool gown, touching her between the shoulders with his lips, a tantalizing little sensation that made her shiver and mourn the pleasures of sensuous love she had missed.

The Persian snorted, but Sandra's calm reminder broke up this badly timed prelude to one of Domitian's rapid sexual conquests. "You couldn't marry me, Lord Domitian, even if I were a blonde. The law says a citizen may not marry a slave."

After the beginnings of a frown, for she knew he was always easily upset, he laughed and let her go. He spread his hands. "Then I'll free you when I'm emperor. Or even before. Like Ancaris' mother. She was a freedwoman and Father couldn't marry her. But that didn't keep them from having a child."

In spite of young Domitian's charm, and his skilled love-

making, she hardly felt that bearing his illegitimate child was any inducement to a sexual experience with him.

"I'm not afraid," Domitian insisted, calling after her.

She hurried away and down the corridor, then across an audience chamber and a flight of steps. During her entire progress to Daphne's elegant quarters, she became aware for the first time that guards were everywhere, a few Praetorians looking arrogant, Nubians looking portentous, and others, household slaves, even firefighting *vigiles* in uniform. They were all aware of her, and at least some of them would recognize Domitian at sight.

If only the young man had arrived in Rome officially, in full uniform.

In the pillared hall outside Daphne's quarters Sandra was stopped by a powerful, grizzled legionary with a white-gold mustache. This was no palace guard but a Romanized German of Vitellius' Rhine legions. She thought quickly.

"You are from Emperor Vitellius, soldier?"

His forbidding look did not soften, but he saluted. He liked the title given to his commander.

"First of Emperor Vitellius' legions to enter the city. We've three cohorts. We'll have our legion here by week's end."

"Then hail to you, soldier." She went on her way. Apparently the rumors about Otho were true and Vitellius the Pig was now the emperor of Rome.

She found Daphne battling slave girls who were trying to run away with her clothing and jewels. The ornate chamber was strewn with materials, brilliant gowns, sedate stollas and pallas, and jewels broken out of their caskets. At sight of Sandra, lowly reinforcement for Daphne though she was, they fled in a mad scuffle to see who would be first out the door.

But Daphne had one of her women by the arm. The slave seized Daphne's plentiful red hair, and it looked like a fight to the death.

Sandra buffeted the slave across the side of the head and pried her loose; she ran out the door cursing. Sandra began to collect Daphne's scattered clothing while Daphne rescued her jewelry, grumbling, "Why should I be afraid of Vitellius? All I have to do is get the best cook in Rome and start entertaining the old Pig—that is to say, the great emperor."

It was a relief to hear her. Smuggling one person off the Palatine would be hard enough.

"Don't flaunt your jewels," Sandra advised her. "His troops

may be more greedy. I wish you had a few gowns long enough to fit a tall woman."

Daphne waved her to a small antechamber. "Take anything you want. My women used to change in there."

Luckily, one of Daphne's slaves had been tall. Sandra slipped out of her own dark-green gown, put on the longest she found, a neat, respectable blue dress, and then on top of it, her own gown, which would be recognized by the guards who had seen her.

Daphne wanted to know, "Are you going to try and fool them the way you got out of your room in Lutetia? I was so scared then. I didn't know you can always get by if you use your head."

Sandra didn't correct her. "It gave me the idea. That and your thieving maids."

She made no further explanation. She didn't trust Daphne's discretion. Daphne was physically gifted, but her mentality was geared solely toward self-preservation. And she would very soon sacrifice Domitian to save herself.

As Sandra left the suite of the young woman who had been "empress" so briefly, she asked, "Will you be safe?"

Daphne flashed her best smile. "Leave Vitellius and his men to me."

Uneasy in spite of the girl's confidence, Sandra went back to Ancaris' rooms, hoping no one would remark on her sudden increase in weight, but apparently no one noticed the two gowns she wore. She found both the old Persian woman and Ancaris trying to restrain Domitian, who had decided to escape by the window. It would have taken a skilled acrobat to get up from there to the roof or to drop safely two stories to a marble balustrade. Even Ancaris was relieved to see Sandra. Reinforced by Sandra, Zostra managed to get him back into the room, where he balked at wearing a woman's gown.

Sandra asked Ancaris, "Will you be safe here, my lady?"

Ancaris was calm but failed to hide her tension. "Helios tells me they will take care to hold the child and me safe. But I haven't told him about Domitian yet, and Vitellius' soldiers are sure to call him a spy."

"Which, in fact, I am." Domitian confessed cheerfully. "But I've got to get back to Max and tell him where the forces are placed on the Palatine."

Ancaris was less optimistic. "Vitellius' men have already reinforced the barracks outside the city. If they discover Max, he is a dead man."

They were all silent for a minute. Sandra felt a sudden inner panic at the thought of Maximian's death. She had first wanted him alive for her own vengeance, and more recently for his offer to purchase her. His death would be a horror she hadn't really considered.

Ancaris roused them to the present. "What was your plan for Domitian?" It was the first time she had addressed Sandra as an equal.

Sandra went behind the door into the next room, removed the long blue gown, and put on her own again. Aware of Domitian's keen interest as she came back, she threw the blue gown to him.

"You will be a thieving slave. Lady Ancaris will send us on our way with a slap, or a blow, accusing us of stealing her jewelry. Lord Domitian and I will sob and sniffle our way out. Two more cowardly slave women."

The Persian muttered, "It will never work."

"I agree." Domitian laughed, holding up the blue gown. "My hair is too short, even if this fits."

But Ancaris, like Sandra, was determined.

"You can wear one of my cloaks with a cowl."

"Or a slave's cloak," Sandra suggested. A slave running away in her mistress' rich cloak was certain to arouse attention.

The Persian made no objection. She loved the young Domitian. She hobbled off to get the covering which might save his life. Overwhelmed by three women, Domitian found himself obeying them. The women were further inspired to haste by the increasing turmoil they heard around them in the rooms of the palace. Fleeing slaves and imperial servants in the halls raced past incoming advance troops of Vitellius. Ancaris' golden eyes glazed with fear.

"Will they stop him?"

But Sandra found the confusion helpful. "The more the better for our purposes. I wish we might smuggle out the child. Are you quite certain of his safety?"

Ancaris smiled, as if she read Sandra's deep interest in "Max's son." "You may be sure I know what is best for my child. Helios has assured me I might count on Vitellius' friendship, so long as I didn't act against him. But he is terrified that Vespasian has spies in the city, and I must get Domitian out. They are sure to know what he is doing here, out of uniform. Are you ready?"

"It's like the amphitheater," Domitian told them, preening

himself in the gown he had squeezed into over his tunic. "Gods! They will think I am another Nero." Nevertheless, he was beginning to be amused, and though he looked an odd sight, each of the women knew better than to laugh at him. They understood that the slightest ridicule would arouse that dark, somber side of his disposition.

Sandra took a long breath and started for the door, almost dragging Domitian after her. He had stopped to kiss the Persian and his sister farewell. He looked more excited than frightened. He shifted the cloak tight around him as he followed Sandra on the run, burying his head in the large, overshadowing cowl.

Reaching the door, Sandra whispered, "Be afraid. You've been caught stealing. Act frightened. Act!" For one horrid instant she felt like Nero instructing himself and her in a performance of Queen Dido's farewell.

Ancaris surprised her by leaping into her own performance. Sandra threw the door open and rushed out with Domitian close behind her, making weird, snuffling noises that he thought appropriate, and hot on his trail was Ancaris, grabbing up weapons as she went.

Massive guards had been placed on either side of her doors. One of them put an arm out, halting her. "Not you, my lady. You're safe, but you stay right there. You're better off. No point you going out in that mob and getting yourself killed."

Ancaris ignored them and shrieked, "Thieving traitors, both of you. Out! You cowards!"

She hurled a hand mirror that just missed Sandra. Unluckily, it hit the breast of a young member of the *vigiles* some steps beyond them.

"The bastard knows me from last year," Domitian whispered to Sandra.

"Whine. Sob," she ordered him and kept shuffling her sandals over the marble floor to the far terrace. She herself ducked, and as the firefighter, shaking off the broken frame and the silver plate of the mirror, reached out to grab Domitian's cloak, Sandra looked up piteously into the firefighter's eyes. She succeeded in distracting him from Domitian.

"Save us. Oh, noble sir, don't let her catch us. We stole nothing." She let him see her figure, respectable but with no hiding place for valuables.

The firefighter, seeing Ancaris ready to hurl a hairbrush after the mirror, ducked and pushed Sandra onward through

the archway to the terrace, which was jammed with palace servants fleeing and legionaries tramping in.

This time Domitian took the lead, elbowing their way through the crowd. Twice the cowl fell back from his well-known Roman features that had been called handsome since his fourteenth birthday. His brown eyes attracted several female servants, but they hurried by without the slightest pause. Things were desperate indeed, if an attractive youth could not hold their attention. Sandra jerked the cowl forward, shadowing his eyes. Domitian struggled but let her win.

They saw three legionaries marching up the steps at the far end of the terrace. From the yellow-haired, fierce look of them, they were a part of Vitellius' Germanic legions.

"Not a Roman among them," Domitian muttered. "Vitellius the Pig sends his private army."

"Don't talk politics."

She saw that the terrace overlooked another terrace below, and then several openings into the upper stands of the Circus Maximus. She wondered if she and Domitian could possibly get down to that lower terrace. But too many were watching.

Behind them they heard the heavy, booted stride of a tall Praetorian Guard. They both remembered the recent blood-stained reputation of the Praetorians and began to run again. They were now caught between the Praetorian, obviously pursuing them, and the German legionaries at the far end of the terrace.

The Praetorian was too fast. Without increasing his rapid stride to a run, he caught Domitian's arm. Curiously enough, he made no effort to snap off the cowl that disguised Domitian's sex.

"You! Off the terrace. And the other female. This way. There are enough thieves in Otho's service. We're getting rid of all that."

The harsh, loud tone was unfamiliar, but with a thrill of hope, Sandra thought she recognized the voice itself, even before she turned and saw the well-remembered face of General Max below the great red-plumed Praetorian helmet.

She glanced around quickly. If Max was discovered he would be in greater danger than Domitian. Vitellius and his men could never allow General Vespasian's favorite aide to remain alive when he had clearly been spying out Vespasian's strength among the populace. But from the look he gave her, half humorous, half alight with joy, he didn't seem to care about the danger.

Chapter Three

Sandra had never dreamed, even in her recent sympathetic dreams of Maximian, that she could be so relieved to see him. She tried not to seem happy, in case the legionaries should notice, and she was expressionless as Max shoved her and Domitian over the area they had already covered since they reached the terrace. Domitian had thrown himself into his performance, pretending to accept Max as his enemy, struggling wildly while he was pushed along.

Behind them they heard the legionaries call to Max, "Good work. Treat 'em rough. Cursed Otho-lovers!"

"Emperor Vitellius is already in the city. Give 'em to him. That'll show our loyalty."

Once inside the palace again, Maximian pushed open a little door half hidden by pillars marking the end of the spacious hall.

"In there. Quick."

Domitian made his way first down a winding flight of steps so dark Sandra could only follow him by feeling the damp walls and hoping there were no broken steps below. Max came last, moving with admirable silence in spite of his Praetorian breast armor and boots.

"Turn to the left," he ordered Domitian, who had found a door in his way and was feeling for the latch.

With the door open upon the dark understructure of the Circus Maximus, Domitian followed orders, running along in a southerly direction between wood, cement, and marble supports and cleverly missing all obstacles until he came out into the daylight from under the imperial box halfway down the east side of the circus.

Sandra followed his rapid progress with difficulty. She had not been trained in the legion like her two companions. Running over obstacles in the half-dark, she had to be lifted by Maximian off broken stones, abandoned wood pilings, and the carcass of a long-dead cat.

Coming out of this gloom at last, she blinked in the bright sun but was relieved that in spite of the city's turmoil, crowds were pouring into the Circus for the day's chariot races. These crowds, hugging cushions and folded cloaks, were so anxious to reserve places on the long cement seats that few paid any attention to these newcomers who popped up in their midst. They wouldn't be the first Palatine inhabitants who had reached their stadium seats by this shortcut. Nevertheless, Max indicated the cowl of Domitian's travel cloak, and Domitian pulled it forward. Luckily, a spring wind was blowing and half the crowd poured into the seats similarly dressed.

Max pushed the two "prisoners" ahead of him down the steps and out by one of the east exits into the arcades surrounding the circus. It was five years since the Great Fire of Rome had begun near this spot, but there were still signs of the conflagration in the blackened arches and behind the temporary stalls set up for the food peddlers. Here fresh crowds gathered around the coal-burning braziers, buying chick-peas and sausages to eat while watching the races.

After the long run through hostile crowds and soldiers on the Palatine, Sandra could hardly believe they were actually out of the palace. She stopped, breathless.

"He is safe now? We can relax? They won't kill him just because he's in the city out of uniform, will they?"

Max had taken her arm, knowing how tired she must be, but at her obvious concern for Domitian, she thought he frowned slightly, looking from her to Domitian and back. It might have been the natural hard look the uniform gave him. In any case, he himself was risking his life to save his wife's brother. But she was intrigued by the possibility that Maximian might be jealous.

Domitian, a dark pessimist one minute and walking on Olympus the next, was now elated following their adventure and his display of courage. He began to strip the gown off under cover of his cloak and cowl, but a girl clutching the arm of a Rhine legionary and eating sausage out of his hand like a dog nudged her companion. The soldier scowled, staring at the youth. Max took a tight grip on Domitian's shoulder.

"No more of that indecency. Come along, thief."

Domitian accepted Max's loud hint, cowered and moved on through the arcade, prompted by Max's fist in his back. Sandra hurried beside them, all her earlier worries reinforced. By the time they were in the next street, which ran below the

Palatine on the south and eventually crossed the Sacred Way, she felt it safe to speak to Max. Passersby now seemed too intent on their own flight, hurrying by with a few possessions on their shoulders or dragged behind them tied in ancient cloaks. They seldom looked at the Praetorian except covertly and with fear.

Sandra began, "Your wife said she and the baby were safe in the palace. Her friend Helios, the chamberlain, had made some sort of arrangement with Vitellius."

"I couldn't persuade her to come with me, at all events. It seems she expects to be close to the new emperor. I couldn't persuade, cajole or force her. She claims this is her only way to save her property and valuables in Rome from being confiscated. And, of course, she believes that damned eunuch in everything. He is 'handy,' she says."

"Very handy for her," Sandra agreed tightly. "But even he couldn't explain Lord Domitian's presence on the Palatine in a slave's tunic."

Domitian grinned. "Leave it to Ancaris. She'll have me back inside the Palatine as soon as she gets in the old Pig's good graces. Food is going to be her weapon. And while I'm on the Palatine, I can keep on informing Father's city spies what is going on."

"You've had enough of that. Your father would have me hanged, drawn, and quartered if you were caught spying."

"But shouldn't your baby have been gotten out?" Sandra went on, reaching the point which had been her first concern.

"My wife's baby," Max said shortly.

Domitian looked at him. "Ancaris had a grandmother with black hair."

Max raised his hand from Domitian's back. This time there was no mistaking his irony. "Trust me to know simple biology, Domitian. The child cannot be mine. It wasn't necessary to see him to know that. But I was curious. In fact, the child reminds me of someone. Which isn't surprising, considering my wife's predilection for my subordinates."

"Even so," Sandra ventured anxiously, "if we could get him out of the palace, he would no longer be a pawn. Your wife chose her position, but the baby didn't."

"Have you tried to separate the two? I doubt if she had any particular love for the father, knowing Ancaris. But she is using the child as a wedge with her father. Already, Vespasian talks about nothing but young Flavius when we

are together. I think he would rather discuss young Flavius than the immediate campaign to win Rome."

He looked down at her. His smile transformed him in spite of that helmet which spelled out ruthless power. She tried not to be moved by it, but the light in those hazel eyes made her remember the early Lutetia days, in spite of all her later vows of hatred and revenge.

"You can still have a tenderness for my wife's child, after all that has been done to you?" He kept studying her and suddenly snapped his fingers, interrupting her before she could make some explanation for her interest in young Flavius.

"Lysandra. Of course."

It sounded like music to hear her full name again.

He went on, "I know why the boy's face is familiar. It was your face I saw on that child. The big, dark eyes, that lock of black hair, the cheekbones and the mouth that I've often—"

"Max!"

They had forgotten Domitian. Dark with anger, he stopped in the street, trying to break off this betrayal of his sister's rights. He was bumped and swung around by two running men. Angrily, he stuck one leg out, tripping one of his assailants. The other well-dressed patrician made a grab at Domitian, but seeing the Praetorian beside him, hurriedly dragged the fallen man to his feet and they both ran on, colliding with other panicked citizens who were trying to move against the wind and hold their togas in place at the same time.

General Max laughed openly at Domitian's anger, perhaps misunderstanding the source of his jealousy. "Am I being called to account on behalf of my adulterous wife?"

Whatever Domitian would have said, Sandra cut in with a sharp edge. "General Maximian, are you trying to say you think I am the mother of that child?"

That completely surprised him. He raised her chin with one finger. He seemed to be excessively interested in her mouth. She wet her lips, trying not to be moved by his close inspection.

"No," he said, "my wife would never waste her affections on anyone else's child. Flavius is hers, all right. But the father must have been closely related to you."

In spite of the effect he had on her, and the way he reminded her of what she had lost in not having a man's love, she saw quite clearly in her mind's eye the face of her father. Her voice was stiff with emotion. It was hardly audible amid

the city sounds around them. He had to lean over her to hear.

"As close as a father." She looked up at him. "You remember Perseus, the man you said had no relations with your wife. You took me to see his dead face. It is that face you see on young Flavius."

General Max raised his head, stopped looking at her. She felt the gulf between them again and told herself how glad she was.

Domitian, meanwhile, had been jealously trying to interfere, but seeing the sudden constraint between them, he became contrary and wanted to make things right.

"Anyway, Ancaris is certainly a good mother. You've got to admit that. And she swears she and the baby are safe as long as that fellow Helios has connections with Vitellius."

"He is a horror," Sandra put in. She knew Max had heard her, though he didn't indicate it. Perhaps in spite of her bitterness toward him, he would do something about Helios.

He said quietly, "I got into the Palatine for several reasons. One was to purchase you from this Helios. I didn't find him. I found you and Domitian instead."

She hardly knew what to say. Hope of freedom was too strong, too glorious. But it was impossible to believe he had gone to the Palatine masquerading as a Praetorian Guard in order to save her from the eunuch chamberlain. Even if it was true, it was too late. She couldn't forget all he had been responsible for.

The body of her father as well as her own terrible experiences lay between them. She managed to say, "I didn't know." She was telling herself that his physical attraction for her had nothing whatever to do with his guilt in other matters.

Domitian, who had plunged angrily ahead, heard them and, wanting to top Max's generosity, reached back for her hand.

"I'll buy you tomorrow. No. Today. The minute I find whoever represents Vitellius on the Palatine. Then you'll belong to me."

She didn't want to antagonize Domitian, so she was relieved when Max reminded him, "You can't go anywhere in Rome until you arrive in the normal way, in uniform, not concealed in a slave's skirts."

Domitian would have said something angry on the spur of the moment, but they had to concentrate on circling the com-

plexities of Nero's unfinished Golden House. This ornate octopus of a palace had spread over the heart of the city's burned area and had aroused more antagonism than all Nero's punishments of conniving senators or the mysterious and dreaded Christian sect. Already, under Galba and Otho, the Golden House was being dismantled.

"Was it really as beautiful as it sounds?" Sandra asked. The three of them looked back at scarred and broken walls where the populace had stolen all the bricks and marble they could cart away.

"Cluttered," said Max. He put his palm under her elbow, boosting her up to a high stepping stone between the wagon ruts.

But Domitian was more charitable to the dead emperor's building spree. "It had beautiful frescoes, and wonderful furnishings. He took the best from the Palatine. Gold and silver and copper, lapis lazuli. Exquisite mosaics. All kinds of jewels."

"Two years ago the passages and corridors between the Palatine and the Golden House cut off half the streets in this part of town," Max reminded him. "The place didn't look so beautiful to the city dwellers then." He motioned for them to turn off the crowded street. They found themselves in an alley that had been flushed clean between the steppingstones by the recent spring rains. Shadowed by five- and six-story tenements, it looked to Sandra as if it might be perennially dark and chilly. She shivered.

Max comforted her. "We are nearly there. Luckily, I made myself a Praetorian prefect. One of the advantages is the use of a chariot and four. Otherwise, with the laws about wheeled traffic what they are, we would have to walk to Acté's farm, or worse, wait in the city until sunset."

A running man bedecked in jewels and a rich, pleated Greek himation ran past them in terror, stumbling over his skirt, catching himself, running onward. He was pursued at length by some half a dozen laughing soldiers of one of Vitellius' legion. They paid no attention to the man in the Praetorian prefect's uniform or his two prisoners.

They reached a cross street just as their prey slipped between the cobbles and lay there groaning. Max got between Sandra and her view of the luckless Greek too late. To her horror, the legionaries plunged their swords into the writhing man and began to strip off his rings.

Max hurried her on, but she was shaking again, newly aware of the deadly danger in the city today.

Within minutes they reached the stables back of a more impressive and richer tenement whose ground-floor dwellers were among the patricians of Rome. An urchin of the neighborhood guarded four fretting bay horses already harnessed to a substantial steel-reinforced chariot, much stronger than the light cars used at the races.

"Any trouble?" Maximian asked the boy as he flipped five silver sesterces to him, one after the other.

Sandra thought the boy looked untrustworthy. He had none of her friend Theron's open, friendly charm which covered an equally crafty nature. This boy was dirty, pathetic, and hungry, and she thought for a minute he was going to eat the coins, but he merely tested their weight and substance before sticking them into the filthy tunic he wore bloused with a gaudy, fringed sash. As Max lifted Sandra into the chariot and Domitian jumped up, impressively agile, the boy took off on a run and disappeared around the front of the stable into the street.

Seconds later, two lengthy shadows crossed the stable doorway. They were German legionaries, big and powerful. One of them had a mustache that sprouted wide enough to look like extra ears. Domitian stiffened beside Sandra, and she knew that these two soldiers could not be dismissed as easily as the dangers they had escaped on the Palatine and in the streets.

Both legionaries had their hands on their shortswords. The speaker of the two stepped into the stable, his high-laced boot crackling on the straw. "You're not the Praetorian prefect. We know him. He's gone over to our emperor. Identify yourself."

Maximian remained calm, haughty, an impressive figure in the great red plume of his high rank. "Out of my way. I'm on business of Emperor Vitellius. Delay me and it will cost you both a flogging."

The two legionaries looked at each other. While Sandra and Domitian froze into statues at this new danger, Maximian brazed it out sternly.

"Report to your commanding officer. Tell him I'm taking two slaves for questioning at the Praetorian camp. They may know where Otho hid the valuables he stole from the imperial treasury."

"None of that," the spokesman of the two insisted hoarsely. "No looting until Vitellius gets here."

The other agreed. "Aye. That's the order." They started forward, one of them reaching for the right trace-mate of the team.

Max, who had leaped up into the chariot, now let his whip out and lashed it across the soldier's arm. The bite of the whip made him leap back against his companion. The team darted forward. Both legionaries scrambled to get out of the way of the terrified horses, and one of the men grabbed at the chariot rail, trying to swing up.

Max wound the reins in one callused hand and kicked his assailant in the belly, but the other legionary had gone around the back and hauled Domitian out by the collar of his tunic and one arm. The youth fought in that tough grasp, finally getting one hand on the soldier's shortsword. While they struggled, panting and slipping on the straw, Max tried to control the frantic horses with one hand and get his sword out with the other.

Clumsily, Sandra put both her hands around Max's to hold the reins. She had never dreamed that the mere handling of smooth lines on a team could produce these sudden blisters and bloody cracks across her palms as Max's hand was jerked away for an instant and the reins tore at her palms. She couldn't see what had happened, but the legionary struggling to put Max out of the chariot had fallen back, retching and gurgling, spewing blood. Max drew his sword out of the dying soldier's body, and leaving the horses under Sandra's uncertain control, he ran to Domitian's defense.

The youth was on his knees, still clutching at the hilt of the second legionary's sword, but the double-edged blade twisted slowly, inevitably, in the stronger man's hand. By the time Max reached them the blade had been drawn across the throat of Domitian, who was gasping, his eyes closed, his lips pulled back from his teeth as he waited for death.

The stable stank of blood, which further crazed the horses. While Sandra struggled to hold them, Max plunged his reddened sword hard between the muscles of the legionary's neck. The stricken man's eyes rolled. His fingers dropped his own sword and he fell hard across Domitian.

"Get rid of that gown," Max ordered him, as Domitian rolled out from under the body, still in a daze at his escape. He tore off the foul-smelling gown while Max took the reins from Sandra. He waited only until Domitian stumbled blindly

up into the chariot car before giving the horses the signal they waited for, and they clattered out of the stable.

Neither Sandra nor Domitian could speak as the chariot bounded after the four terrified horses, scattering crowds at every corner until they got to the arch of the Appian Way. While the guards on duty examined fleeing pedestrians in front of them, Max reached for Sandra's hands. She was still too shaken to understand until he took them, one at a time, and kissed the grimy, bloody palms. She had never felt the touch of his lips before and was shaken by his effect on her. Her eyes widened as she looked up at him, still aware of her own past bitterness, her vows of revenge, but loving him all the same. He must know it. She couldn't mistake that answering excitement in his sweat-stained face.

It was Domitian who sullenly called them back to the present. "The guard is coming."

"Hail, prefect."

Max saluted carelessly. "I am returning these slaves to the camp. We may learn something from them."

The guard asked indifferently, "Then Otho's dead?"

"A suicide after losing the battle. One of Vitellius' legions is already in the city."

"How are sympathies running there?"

Max grinned. "Running. And fast. But who can say? The cowards just want to be sure who is victor."

"In the end it'll be none of these fumbling generals," the guard confided, greatly daring. "The only one who can straighten us out is Emperor Vespasian."

"Think so?" Max asked without emotion, while Domitian became more cheerful. He started to say something, but Max stepped on his foot and he kept silent.

Once, Sandra thought, I would have been shocked, perhaps fainted, at all the blood I saw spilled today. I would have been revolted by a man who kills two soldiers in as many minutes plunging his blade into living flesh and bone with no compunction, no hesitation. Once I would have thought I must die because of what happened to me. Worst of all, I have admitted to myself that I love the man who condemned me to all that horror.

The ways of the flesh were strange.

When Max drove the horses and chariot under the moss-covered archway that dripped water perennially, Sandra was thinking not of the past, but of a future first as the slave of Maximian, and then as a freedwoman who would give him

the love he obviously didn't receive or want from his cold, golden wife. Sandra thought very little about Domitian rattling around in the chariot beside her, holding on for dear life and looking a little sick after his near escape from death.

The closer Max kept Sandra within the circle of his left arm to protect her from the hard bumps and leaps over broken paving stones, the more sullen and dark-browed Domitian became.

By the time they reached Claudia Acté's villa-farm, Sandra found herself sorry to see the journey end. She had learned during this escape from the Palatine, and more especially, huddled against his body in the bouncing chariot, that her future life and thoughts would always belong to Maximian. Even now, though she was aching in every bone when he lifted her from the chariot, she could think of nothing but that moment ahead when he would buy her from the chamberlain Helios.

Claudia Acté's best horseman came hurrying across the stout grass to handle the horses, and General Max-tossed him the reins. It was like coming home when Sandra walked across the yard between Max and Domitian, and the curious goose, Cleopatra waddled out to investigate all this disturbance of their peaceful afternoon.

Domitian had to be helped in. Max pretended not to see his difficulty and deliberately left him. He knew the youth well, and doubtless felt that Domitian would not want to let him see any weakness in a fellow soldier.

Sandra, badly shaken and dreaming of freedom soon, let Max pick her up and carry her into Acté's kitchen, where Acté herself saw to her comfort. Domitian fought Acté's freedman all the way and then collapsed against the kitchen shelves, breathing hard and shaking.

Acté wanted to know the situation in the city and shook her head over the rumored death of Otho so close on the deaths of Galba and Nero.

She sighed. "What a trail of suffering! I have been praying, asking that there would be no bloodshed. But with two ambitious men—how foolish and wasteful it all is!"

"There won't be an end to this bloodshed until my father agrees to march on Rome and take the throne," Domitian insisted as a slave eased him onto a stool and soothed his bruises with warm water and salves.

Acté raised her head and looked to Maximian, who nodded agreement to this grim prospect.

"I'm afraid so. The people don't trust Vitellius, and they are terrified of his legions. Many of his soldiers aren't Romans and have never seen Rome before." He removed the heavy helmet and breast armor. One of Acté's house servants carried them away while Max leaned against the wall and stretched tiredly.

Watching him with interest, Sandra saw the bronzed, muscular body of the man revealed by his dark, short-sleeved wool tunic. Its hem barely reached his upper thighs, and she saw the scar of a recent wound across his left thigh and wondered if this was the wound she had heard about last winter. Was it possible she had prayed to the god of healing that he should suffer intensely? She wondered what it would be like to love him, and to caress the sunburned column of his throat and neck, blotting out the ugly sexual memories of her past.

The black dread that had haunted her dreams and her waking hours was pushed far back in her mind. It almost but not quite disappeared.

Acté's servants fed them all, and then, in her quiet way, Acté insisted that Domitian should go to bed. With his hands wrapped and his face and throat greasy with unguents, Domitian was more or less pushed into a bed cubicle, and according to the pretty freedwoman who attended him, he went to sleep after proposing that the freedwoman share his bed. She explained to Acté, "He said he would be much more calm if I lay beside him."

Max laughed, but Acté, with a sober face and a twinkle in her eyes, disagreed. "Not according to the great physician Xenophon of Cos. He says such activities are stimulating. Which the Lord Domitian doesn't need at the moment."

Max looked at Sandra. She raised her chin, and returned his gaze freely. He moved across the kitchen to stand beside Sandra with his fingers warmly closed around the back of her neck. He spoke to Acté over Sandra's head.

"I had three motives in returning to Rome. Titus and I have been urging General Vespasian to take the throne. We believed—and our belief was confirmed, that since Nero's suicide, there has been no legitimate head of government. The Senate flounders, agreeing to every whim of the Praetorian Guards. Today, with Vitellius not even in Rome yet, they've already acknowledged him as emperor. But the people everywhere want Vespasian. They know his record of justice and clemency in the Near Eastern provinces."

"I agree," Acté said. She was assisting the cook and pointed a big copper stirring spoon at Max. "But your other motives?"

He grimaced. "To decide what must be done about divorcing my wife without bringing disgrace on her family. I had no interest in the child. I knew it was not mine. But Vespasian accepts young Flavius as legitimate. He is exceedingly fond of Ancaris. He asked me to see the child. I did so. I offered to get Ancaris and the child out of the city, but she refused."

"She may be in great danger."

"I think not. She has a eunuch friend who has managed to get into Vitellius' good graces by selling out the defense of the Palatine. The hill is full of the Pig's men already."

Sandra asked with great interest, "Didn't you find the child endearing?"

Max smiled and ran his fingers slowly, thoughtfully, over her neck to her throat, where they stopped. She was excitedly aware of him.

"Once I saw the child's resemblance to someone who was never out of my thoughts, I became interested." He ended briskly, "Anyway, my third motive for paying Rome this secret call was to buy the Lady Lysandra from the imperial coffers. I haven't yet succeeded, but I will as soon as I get my hands on Vitellius' chamberlain, this Helios fellow."

Sandra rested her cheek against the wrist of his free hand, and Acté, looking pleased and maternal, suggested, "Child, you are as tired as Lord Domitian. You should rest after all this excitement you have gone through. Why don't you take my bedroom there beyond the servants' rooms?"

Sandra knew Acté was right. She got up, aching as badly as Domitian must ache, yet like him, she was thinking of sexual fulfillment. Acté sent a maid ahead of Sandra to light the way, but it was Maximian who took Sandra's arm and walked with her to the simple little bedchamber with its odd drawing of a fish on the wall behind the lamp. The maid waited to remove her filthy, stained green gown and to tuck her under the coverlet, nude so that only the soft wool of the coverlet would touch her bruised flesh. The maid, a freed-woman like all of Acté's servants, carefully stood between Sandra and General Max, who backed off but remained in the doorway.

The maid, a Jewess named Noriah, who had been Sandra's

only confidante at the farm, tried to shoo him out. "Go along now, excellency. You are being very naughty."

He lifted the woman a few inches off the floor, and while she squeaked and protested with suppressed laughter, he peered around her at Lysandra. The latter pulled the coverlet over her body and up to her shoulders but gave him her wide-eyed stare, which had been extremely successful during youthful flirtations in her hometown of Massilia.

"Shall I go, Lysandra?"

"You are a free man. You may do as you please. You will anyway."

He set down the interested Noriah, pointing out, "You see? She wishes me to remain."

Noriah glanced at Sandra with eyebrows raised in question. Sandra, whose pulse was racing, could only shrug, exposing her bare throat and shoulders with the gesture, and Noriah threw up her hands, going out past Maximian and closing the door. He moved to the bed, more slowly now, clearly not wanting to frighten Sandra. He looked down at her. What she saw in his face was neither the temporary lust of the soldier on the Gallic road nor the total abstraction of Emperor Nero who merely studied a theatrical reaction. She raised her hands, touched his cheeks hesitantly, bringing his face closer.

He knelt with one knee on the bed, leaning over her. She was astonished that there was as much tenderness as passion in his eyes.

"You've suffered much, and through my fault," he murmured, his voice hoarse with concern.

"You didn't intend it. I know that now. Enobarbus told me."

"By the gods—any gods there are—I swear I never intended it! I wanted Enobarbus to bring you safely to Acté. And he would have done so, if he hadn't been waylaid."

"By hired assassins." She started to add his wife's name, but didn't. She was afraid of what he might do to Ancaris' child, her father's little boy, and she couldn't bear to have the child disowned, perhaps given over as a slave to be mistreated forever. Her own little brother.

"If I could prove Ancaris planned it all! And that damned bastard child—"

"No." Anxious to get him off this subject, she sat up quickly. "Don't talk about him, please."

He was moved less by her plea than by the sight of her warm, tawny flesh as he threw off the coverlet that hid the re-

maining half of her body. His hands, though callused by his recent long journeys, were as sensuous as she had dreamed they would be. They began to examine her body from the tip of each tight, expectant breast over the smooth, pale flesh around her navel to the triangle of curly black hair where his hands, for all their delicacy, aroused her to fiery expectancy.

Nor did he give her time for her ardor to cool. She had suspected since their meeting that last night in the audience chamber of the palace of Justice that he would enter her waiting body just this way, making himself a part of her.

For timeless seconds they lay locked together, one flesh, hot with life. The two terrible times she had been with other men faded into the dim recesses of nightmare.

As he lay with her, his lips enticing and titillating her right breast, she touched his head, traced a lock of his hair to its roots, and wondered if there would ever be a way that they might be together like this legally, as husband and wife. There were laws forbidding it. But could she bear to be his mistress? Perhaps for the Lady Lysandra it would be indecent. Unthinkable. Her pride would never permit it. But for the ex-slave, Sandra, it was perfectly correct. She would be thought very odd, perhaps even unsexed, if she did not have a lover.

Max stirred, kissed each of her breasts, and sat up. He had just lowered his head again to touch her lips when the door opened. The lamplight flickered.

Max scowled. "What in Tartarus do you want?"

Sandra turned, saw Domitian standing in the doorway, his eyes burning dark in his pallid, bruised face as he stared at her naked body stretched out before him, that body of whose many uses he had been cheated.

Chapter Four

Embarrassed and humiliated, Sandra covered herself quickly with the coverlet, but Maximian's growling demand had already given him time to recover from any slight embarrassment he himself might have suffered. He straightened his tunic, got up, and stunned Sandra as well as Domitian by informing the youth, "You may as well know I intend to divorce your sister. Unlike your sister, I am satisfied with a single love, this lady. Now, go back to sleep and dream about someone your own age."

Sandra was thrilled and warmed by his reference to her as "this lady." She hoped he wouldn't suddenly remember Domitian's age, which was exactly her own. She felt, however, that he might have treated Domitian with more tact.

The youth opened his mouth, tried to make some protest, but only got out the curious rejoinder, "It's not fair! She would have been my property if I hadn't gone to the war."

These outbursts of temper and jealousy troubled Sandra as signs of inner torment. She had already heard his complaints against his father, and his elder brother Titus, and now he upbraided the friend who had perhaps saved his life today.

She tried to soften Max's sharp words.

"My Lord Domitian, maybe if I had seen you first, it would have been different. But I met General Maximian long ago in Lutetia, and I never was your property. I was your friend."

Domitian contradicted her shrilly. "You were meant to be mine. I could have given you real love, not like Max. He's old. Old! And he'll always be married to Ancaris. Father will see to that."

Domitian turned, abruptly stumbled into his own room in a childish temper, and threw himself on the bed.

Seeing Sandra's troubled look, Maximian took her hand between his. "I am thirty-three. I never thought much about it until this minute."

"I don't think of it now. It isn't our ages, or my slavery. It's the Lord Domitian. I told him the truth when I said I wanted to be his friend." She tried to smile. It was a wavering effort, but he encouraged her by his silence and sympathy.

She added, "I was more vindictive than Domitian. I blamed you more than your wife, because her betrayal was no surprise, but I had begun to care for you, even back in Lutetia."

"I know, *carissima*. I don't forget that night here in Acté's house when you showed your bitterness toward me. You were the most beautiful creature I ever saw, even in that hideous purple harlot's robe."

"I hated it."

"I know. The gods be thanked I got to Acté before you could be exposed to that satyr Nero."

As guilty as if she herself had been responsible for her sexual experience with Nero, she avoided telling him that Acté had not saved her.

"What becomes of us after Vitellius arrives? Will you be able to buy me from Helios? You dare not go into Rome again."

"With his sort, money is a weapon. But power is even better. Helios has managed to survive each emperor in this nightmare Rome is going through. He will want to cooperate with Vespasian's aide, just to be sure of his future."

She didn't add the obvious reminder that Helios might find it even more advantageous to cooperate with Vespasian's daughter.

"You won't go into the city again, will you? Those soldiers you killed—Vitellius' troops are sure to be on the watch."

Max said, "Go to sleep, *carissima*. I have a meeting with certain officers from the Praetorian camp. They will meet me at Phaon's villa on the Ostian Way."

"Where Nero died." She still had vivid memories about that.

"Where the Emperor Vespasian's campaign may begin," he corrected her. He kissed her lips, which trembled with her fear for him and herself and the future. "It takes months to plan these things. To transport Vespasian's legions to Rome, and have them received by their adherents in the city. We need the people's support. We don't want to blunder as Galba and Otho did, or make enemies from the first day, as the Pig's men are doing now."

No use in asking him to be careful. He had spent a lifetime in constant danger.

But it was with deep, grinding fear that she saw him go. She tried to sleep.

The next morning she realized how formless and imaginary her fears had been. Maximian was back at his meager breakfast, cheerful and confident over his tough-chewing legionary bread and honey and a handful of figs. He was explaining about the figs to Domitian, who seemed to have gotten over his surly mood and accepted the inevitable loss of his "property."

"Your brother Titus sent these along to you from Judea," Max was explaining.

Domitian accepted one, opened it, and after an instant ate the ripe pink contents. He said lightly between bites, "I suppose he's still having an affair with the Judean king's wife, Queen Berenice. That's one way. Fight to save a man's kingdom from rebellion and he lets his wife pay you, in her own way."

"Berenice is Agrippa's sister, as well as his wife. Not much love lost there. The main thing is to stop the rebellion," Max said, not wanting to get into an argument and arouse Domitian's ever dormant jealousy of his older brother.

When Sandra came in, Max got up and seated her on the stool next to Acté. It was the first time since she had been the Lady Lysandra that anyone but Acté had treated her like a free woman. She was deeply grateful. She accepted the figs he offered her and would have liked to ask how Maximian's meeting went last night. But she didn't know whether Domitian was aware of it, even though it was in support of his father.

Belatedly, Domitian tried to show his own good manners and concern for Sandra. He gave her olives and wine and asked if she had slept well. Fearing this would bring up a subject more painful to him than to anyone else, he floundered, "I mean—your bruises, are they better now? As for me, I ache all over."

Made soft-hearted by her own happiness and her awareness that he was sincerely concerned for her, Sandra put her hand on the short sleeve of his tunic and thanked him.

"You are very kind. I am feeling much better. I hope you are."

He was pleased. Boldly, under Maximian's sudden quizzical look, he put his hand on hers and said simply, "I'm not

really a child, you know, Just because Max and Titus treat me like one. I should be in Syria fighting those accursed Parthian raiders. You'd find out soon enough I can be as big a hero as old Max here."

She sympathized at once. "I know. Of course you can."

But he caught Max's smile and added stiffly, "I went to the Palatine myself in disguise. That took courage. Max told me to stay secretly with Father's friends at Phaon's house, but if Max could be a spy, I could too. I found out plenty on the Palatine. You have to admit that."

Max nodded. "Yes, Domitian. You certainly did. The place is full of Vitellius' men. We know that anyway. And we've seen my wife's child. All too clearly."

"Please," Sandra began, always sensitive to his contemptuous references to her father's baby son.

Domitian paid no attention to her interruption. He answered Max's easy taunt. "Well, you didn't have to come and rescue me. I was going to get Sandra out of there myself."

Nobody contradicted him, and the truth was self-evident to Domitian. He ate another fig, his somber face softening into a grin. "Maybe you saved us, Max. I admit it."

There was a general sigh of relief. Claudia Acté made a ceremony of offering Domitian a branch of luscious grapes.

"You are indeed a brave man, Lord Domitian. Only a brave man has the courage to admit anything."

Flushed with pleasure, Domitian accepted the grapes, broke one off, and tried to pop it into Sandra's mouth. She choked but thanked him and managed to eat the grape without swallowing the seed.

He was certainly as unlike the great Vespasian as any younger son could be. She remembered that rough, ugly, strong face of the soldier who snored through Nero's great performance. It was quite possible for Domitian to "snore" through any emperor's performance, but it would be a deliberate, angry gesture, not an innate part of the confident soldier.

Her feelings for the young patrician were ambivalent. There were times when she liked him. There were moments like that one in Ancaris' Palatine apartment only yesterday when he had kissed her neck and his appeal had been extremely effective. At other moments he was frightening. His jealousy and his dark moods suggested dangerous undercurrents.

Maximian finished his soldierly breakfast quickly and sug-

gested that he show Sandra the path over the fields to Phaon's villa-farm. There were a thousand places she would rather have visited. She often took eggs and poultry over in exchange for vegetables while she worked for Acté, but she always hated the trip. She remembered all too vividly the enforced suicide of Emperor Nero, and while she felt no affection for the dead man, she hated the memory of that terrible night. But this was her best means of being alone with Maximian, so she agreed.

He pulled her close to him with an arm around her shoulders as they walked along the little footpath through fields, fallow ground, and a thicket which was beginning to come alive with mosquitoes, now in the spring. Sandra beat off mosquitoes frantically but laughed at Max's wild flailing efforts to save her from the maddening creatures.

When he had her close against his body again and they were making their way through Phaon's patch of peas and greens, she asked her lover the ancient question of all women in love. "If it were possible, would you make me your wife?" Before he could answer, she added, "If the law permitted it, I mean?"

She felt his gaze upon her head and was afraid to look.

"The law will permit it one day." Then he asked lightly, "What is the use of serving the future emperor if I can't ask one small favor of him?"

"There are two arguments against that question, my dear lord. Vespasian may not choose to become emperor. And he may not choose to sacrifice his beloved daughter."

"I refuse to consider your arguments." He stopped. "See here. You think it's something I have only begun to consider since last night? Far from it. To me, you will always be the Lady Lysandra, a Gallic Chieftain's granddaughter. Legally, all that remains is for Vespasian to restore your proper place."

"Then you believe me when I tell you the Lady Ancaris advised my father in his crime?"

She sensed his hesitation before he said carefully, "She was certainly your father's mistress. The child is the image of your father." He smiled. "That would hardly endear him to me, except that the lucky little rogue is the image of you as well. But I suspect the devious ability to get his own way is inherited from his mother."

Far ahead of them the Ostian Way was crowded with morning travelers. Since all wheeled traffic was banned in

Rome after sunrise, the wagons of produce, cement and other building materials, food, and household goods were by now halfway to the port city, but a surprising number of pedestrians lurched along toward Ostia with their life's possessions on their backs. Clearly, the populace didn't trust the strange, violent soldiers of Vitellius.

Studying that stream of traffic all headed away from the capital, Max said sternly, "Vespasian must be made to see that he is needed. By the time he knows what is going on here, he will have to return to Rome."

He sensed that she wasn't interested in politics and told her what she wanted to hear. "You asked if I believe my wife shared your father's guilt. It seems clear enough. Yes. I believe it. One more reason for the divorce, although she has covered her tracks so well it may be hard to prove."

"I don't want you to try to prove it. You would alienate Vespasian forever. I just wanted you to know it. Yourself." She reminded him of her own doubts about the more important matter. "But can you get a divorce? Everything is against it. Lady Ancaris has managed to insinuate herself into the good graces of this new emperor, thanks to Helios. And what if Vespasian becomes emperor? He would never do anything to hurt his daughter."

"*Carissima*, you are borrowing trouble," he insisted. But he had enough doubts to ask, "If the divorce becomes impossible, must I lose you?"

She knew her pride should not let her yield, but after an uneasy pause, the tenderness between them won and she said, "If you are going to buy me, you will have me underfoot, in any case. Unless you sell me."

"You forget. I intend to free you. You will be your own mistress."

Unable to control her deep gratitude that he had recalled his promise, she threw her arms around him. They were still locked in their warm embrace, laughing at their own childish conduct, when the freedman Phaon came out across the field to remind them of the business at hand.

"Sorry to break into this interesting display of peacemaking, general, but we have an unexpected visitor."

"From Vitellius?" Max asked as Sandra freed herself from him, trying to appear highly respectable before this businesslike man. She always remembered that in the end, it was he who had forced the poniard into his friend Nero's breast.

Phaon said, "In a manner of speaking, he's from Vitellius. He holds his new post from the Pig. I understand he was dealing with him before Otho had even marched out of Rome."

Sandra had a premonition, and all the old revulsion gripped her. She stepped slightly behind Max, who kept his arm around her with the promise, "No one can hurt you now, Lysandra. Keep saying it until you believe it."

"It's Helios, the chamberlain, isn't it?" she asked Phaon.

"The eunuch, yes. Puts me in mind of a serpent, the way he moves around."

"Why did he come here instead of Acté's house?" Max wanted to know. "He must suspect Acté."

"It's my belief he hoped to spy out our friends here. But I have signals set up. The shutters on the back of the house are up when it's safe, down when it's not. So none of Vespasian's sympathizers has arrived yet, Almighty Zeus be thanked! Most of them know enough to come in behind the wall by the kitchen garden. Incidentally, Helios has six legionaries waiting on the Ostian Way, in case he gets into grouble here. But I don't think he wants to use them. Stay in with each successive power. That seems to be his family seal."

They looked across the fields and saw a number of soldiers shooting dice on the side of the road, just beyond the hooves of their decurion's mount. Max seemed undisturbed by the sight.

"What does he say he wants, this serpent of yours?"

"He has Vitellius' free pass for Domitian to enter the capital, as long as he comes correctly, in uniform. He thought he'd find Domitian here. It was your wife's idea. When he didn't find him he demanded that I produce him. He seems to prefer not to know more than he has to about any of Vespasian's followers. He's seen you from that window, by the way."

"But the general is out of uniform," Sandra protested. "Those soldiers can murder him."

"Helios let me know just now that you are safe, general, as long as you don't enter Rome. I've an idea he doesn't want to give Vespasian an excuse to invade Italy, as he might if they murdered his favorite commander."

"You flatter me. All the same, I want to see Helios, so we are both satisfied." The vigor with which Maximian spoke transmitted itself to Sandra, so close to his body. He assured her, "This makes the whole thing much easier and quicker."

Helios can buy and sell imperial property. I won't have to wait until I can get back into the city before buying you."

"If you are right, excellency."

He told her good-humoredly, "I'm always right."

Playing to this light, positive mood, she said demurely, "Yes, my lord general." But the worry had begun. Was it all a lie that Helios did not want to capture or murder Max?

"Besides," Phaon reminded them, "what else can you do? They've already seen you."

On this commonsense but slightly ominous note, they went in together.

Helios was gracefully seated in an aging chair with a high back. It looked so much like a dilapidated throne that Sandra, ever mindful of Phaon's long friendship with Nero, supposed the chair had been reserved for the late emperor in the days when he visited his freedman. As for the present occupant, nothing would make him look kingly to Sandra.

Her flesh still crawled at the expression in his eyes that were like blue glass, as he surveyed her from head to toe. He seemed to see through the plain, dark gown given her by Daphne, and to look at her as she was the night of her arrival in Rome, when he made his minute examination of one more naked slave in his power. She could still feel his chill fingers prowling over her body, and she was endlessly grateful for Maximian's strong, powerful presence beside her.

It appeared for a brief time that Helios, the chamberlain in charge of all imperial slaves on the Palatine, would remain seated. In this way he would demonstrate that politically he was the superior of a general whose loyalty remained currently under suspicion. Sandra could almost read the weighing that went on in Helios' mind. Then another idea must have occurred to him—that so many emperors had come and gone in the last year, Vitellius might go as well. In which case, no candidate remained but Vespasian. And this was Vespasian's close lieutenant.

He arose in his elegant way, saluted Max.

"Greetings, Lucius Maximian. I am delighted to see you still here, now that Emperor Vitellius has been acknowledged. But you are safe, so far as I am concerned. It isn't as if you had committed some crime—murdered legionaries, for instance. I certainly am not your enemy. Tell the loyal emperor Vespasian my very words." Cynically, Max nodded. Helios went on, "Although I have heard gossip that you were

seen in disguise on the Palatine. Visiting your lovely wife and your enchanting new son, of course."

"Gossip is notoriously unreliable," Max said crisply. "What brought you here, Helios? Are you out gathering in all the friends of our late emperors to support our newest?"

It was a mistake to try wits with the honey-tongued Helios. He corrected Max smilingly, "If I were gathering in friends of the late emperors, I would hardly visit our dear Phaon. We all know his was the hand that sent the wretched Nero to his death."

Phaon reddened but knew enough not to protest. "Which should make me a faithful subject of his successors, whoever they may be. Helios, you said you came—"

"I am called the Lord Helios. A small matter, but it makes us better friends."

"My Lord Helios," Phaon corrected himself, gritting his teeth as the chamberlain resumed his seat. "You came about the young Domitian. We can have him here in half an hour. Or you may go to him."

Helios cleared his throat delicately. "I prefer not to know where he is now, if not here. It might entail bad relationships in future, when our political troubles are over." If he did guess Domitian was with Claudia Acté, he did not want to antagonize her, it seemed. "And with Domitian was a woman, an imperial property. I am to collect her as well."

Sandra remained tense, but Max spoke up in a businesslike way with a confidence that almost communicated itself to her.

"About this so-called imperial slave. In plain Roman coin, what is she worth to the treasury? I'm certain the new emperor can use a little extra money."

Helios' eyelids lowered slowly. He seemed to have closed his eyes, but Sandra was sure he watched her and General Maximian through his lashes.

"True. A little money is always handy. You have it with you?"

Much encouraged, Sandra began to hope.

Max said, "I can give you a note on the banking house of Flacchus and Sons on the Aemilian Way."

Helios nodded. "Of course. Let us hope the House of Flacchus is loyal to our noble Vitellius and hasn't been sacked by angry patriots who might resent its support of the late Peacock Otho."

"What is the price of the Lady Lysandra?"

"For the slave Sandra, the price, as I recall, was . . . I must check." Helios' deceptively thin hands went to the silver-studded belt at his waist. Sandra wondered: Did he use that belt also against slaves who forgot to call him "Master"? He drew one of two cylinders from his belt, tapped the end of his palm, and pulled out the thin scroll. He pretended to read as he unrolled the papyrus, but by this time Sandra was sure he knew its contents from memory.

"Yes," he reflected aloud, slapping it against his palm when he finished his pantomimed study. "Expensive, you will say, and I must agree. But that was the price set."

"The price!" Max demanded.

"Eight thousand gold auriae. The final price agreed to. A compromise. For the sake of the emperor's empty coffers, I held out for ten, and the offer was five. So you see, this is a fair compromise."

Sandra felt something ominous in the air. The fellow was playing a cat-and-mouse game. Things would not go on as they had seemed to begin. She didn't know whether Maximian sensed this or not. He turned to Phaon impatiently.

"A stylus and tablet. I'll write to my bankers and you may redeem it for the money at once."

But Phaon had his own problems. Two men were walking through the gate toward the front of the house. They wore travel capes over plain tunics that did not identify their station in life. Sandra guessed from Phaon's ill-concealed panic that they were among Vespasian's supporters here to discuss inviting the great emperor to take over the desperate empire. These must be among the few men who hadn't been told of Phaon's signal with the shutters at the back of the house.

While Phaon hurried to the front door, he pointed toward his little tablinum, the library and study where he did his bookkeeping.

The eunuch waited until Max was halfway to the tablinum before he said softly, "I hope I did not mislead you, general. It was far from my intention."

Max stopped, turned, and looked at him. At the same time Sandra thought with dread: Here it is, what I've known would come. The trap.

"What is your intention?" Max demanded. "Has your price gone up again?"

"Not at all. That would be dishonest and it might have raised your hopes unnecessarily."

Sandra saw Max's hand go to his flank where, in uniform,

he would have found his sword. His only weapon was a meat-cutting poniard, and Sandra was terrified that he would use it. If he murdered one of the new emperor's chosen servants he would have the whole of Vitellius' two legions after him. He would never get back to Vespasian with his all-important information, and it was beginning to look as if Sandra's own happiness, like that of the entire empire, depended on persuading Vespasian that Rome needed him on the Palatine rather than the far borders of the East.

Helios sensed that he had gone far enough. He handed the scroll to Max. "You will see that it is all legally recorded. The sale of the Greco-Gallic slave called Sandra, for the sum of eight thousand gold auriae, paid into the imperial treasury."

This was a greater blow to Max than to Sandra, who had suspected Helios' attempt to torture them from the moment she saw him in Phaon's house.

Max did not seem to react at the news, but the heavy papyrus was squeezed so tightly in his fingers Helios had to chide him.

"I beg you, don't ruin the bill of sale. It is only a copy, of course. Still, it has its uses."

Max threw the stiff roll at him. It struck Helios' face. The eunuch flinched but managed a wavering smile as he picked up the scroll.

"And who was the buyer?" Max asked icily, not keeping a tight rein upon his emotions. He reached for Sandra's hand, held it so hard her bruised fingers felt like the papyrus he had discarded. But she welcomed even that pain, in the strength he gave her.

Helios gently rubbed the spot on his forehead where the scroll had struck him.

"It was all here in the bill of sale. You should have read it, general, instead of letting your temper get the better of you. I understand your natural agitation, though, and I certainly bear no grudge. Your wife has often told me of the deep devotion you hold for the slave woman." Max made a quick, threatening move, but was stopped by Phaon, who came in through the door behind him with the two cloaked visitors.

"Take care, excellency."

Helios rattled on, "Technically, the woman was purchased by one Titus Flavius Domitianus. The Lord Domitian. However," he added as Max started to speak, "the actual owner will be the person who paid the price. Your wife, the Lady

Ancaris. This property will remain in her possession, and her service, until the young Domitian repays her the eight thousand auriæ."

Sandra cried out, but Max hushed her sternly. "No panic. You forget, if my wife purchased you, then you are my own property. It is the law."

"The law," Helios repeated sweetly. "But according to the exact terms of the bill of sale, this property was purchased in the name of the Lord Domitian. You have no legal authority over your wife's adult brother, general."

Chapter Five

Phaon, who had reached his fellow conspirators too late to stop them, babbled anxiously now, "Friends, let me present the Lord Helios, chamberlain to the noble Vitellius, our beloved emperor. Like all the loyal followers of Vitellius, you will want to wish the Lord Helios well in his endeavors."

A trifle stiff, the two newcomers came forward and took Helios' wrist and fingers in a comradely grip that neither party felt, while Helios stared over their shoulders, trying to read Max's reaction.

Before Max could make a violent move, Helios reminded him, "I have six legionaries out there on the Ostian Way. I know I will not need them. It would only stir up animosity in the countryside. You didn't think I came alone, surely. I am not a brave man."

Even Sandra couldn't guess what Max might do. His brown weathered countenance had turned pallid, but that was understandable under the circumstances. More puzzling to Sandra, if not so alarming, was the intent expression in his eyes as he glanced at Phaon, who certainly wanted no invasion by Helios' men. They might discover his connection with the plot to bring Vespasian to the throne. Max made no signal to Phaon but turned and looked hard at Sandra.

"It seems you now belong to my wife's brother. I can guess how delighted he will be." She didn't know what to think. Had he decided to sacrifice her to save the conspiracy? He then addressed Helios so casually the eunuch too was puzzled. "I suppose Domitian knows what a lucky dog he is. Strange that he didn't speak of it last night."

"He doesn't know quite yet. I expected to find him here with the Emperor Vitellius' other . . . faithful followers. The Lady Ancaris suspected her brother was in the vicinity of Rome, anxious to pay his respects to the emperor's representatives on the Palatine. In his official capacity." In case they

didn't understand that he knew all about Domitian's attempt at spying, he added silkily, "In full uniform, this time."

"So that accursed bitch has won!" Max shrugged, twisted Sandra around to face him, and, holding both her hands between their bodies, kissed her. She knew he would not give up so easily, and yet his kiss was long, violent, like a farewell, and she returned it with desperation. His voice and manner and worst of all, his next comment about her, were all too genuine.

"Sandra, sweetheart, I cheated your new owner on one occasion. Don't look so puzzled. Have you already forgotten last night at the inn?"

She wouldn't have cared about his boast if it hadn't been made in front of his friends, the friends of Rome's last hope, Vespasian. She pulled away from him, still not sure he wasn't play-acting for the benefit of the narrow-eyed, watchful chamberlain.

Helios didn't like the way things were going. After Maximian's willingness to pay eight thousand gold pieces, he assumed the general's failure to win his beloved slave would upset him. But General Maximian surprised him and everyone else by accepting the situation. His remark, as he let Sandra go, seemed to explain his indifference.

"Don't be too confident, Helios—your pardon, Lord Helios. I still have some influence over my wife. She will sell me the woman yet. You know how wives are." He started toward the door, looked back at Helios. "No. You wouldn't. Would you?"

One of Phaon's secretive guests made the remark worse by snickering. Sandra saw the gleam of fury in Helios' eyes and dreaded whatever Max had stirred up in the eunuch's mind by this remark.

But Helios pretended to ignore it. "You will bring me the Lady Ancaris' brother, since he is clearly nearby? Then the three of us will return to Rome—Domitian, the slave woman, and I. With our six guards. I'll hold the woman here as hostage for your quick return."

"I can have him here," Max answered in a surly way. "But he must know it is safe."

Helios took the second finger-wide papyrus from his belt and handed it to Max. This time Max read the paper aloud: "Ancaris to the freedman, Phaon, Greetings: I have reason to believe my dear brother Domitian is waiting at your villa for assurance of safety if he enters Rome. He will be of great

aid to me in protecting the son of General Maximian Claudius and teaching the child loyalty to our noble Emperor Vitellius.' ”

Max looked up, asking ironically, “Why doesn’t she ask me to walk into Rome? Would I have safe conduct as well?”

“Absolutely. As long as you enter Rome totally without weapons and swear allegiance on your honor to Emperor Vitellius.”

“Then, if I may be dangerous without his oath, why am I not arrested now?”

Helios gestured toward the wide Campanian countryside.

“What? And arouse the countryside against Vitellius? I am not entirely without political sense, general. I am prepared to return to Rome with the Lord Domitian and the slave woman, if the young man chooses to come. Kindly deliver that letter to him from his sister.”

Sandra realized that to save the entire Vespasian conspiracy, they would have to sacrifice her. She must depend upon her own efforts to escape.

Helios ordered Phaon, “Give the woman a cloak. We will wait half an hour, the time marked by that water clock standing there near the tablinum. If neither the general nor Lord Domitian is back by that time, I will leave for Rome with the slave woman.”

While the freedman hurried to oblige with the cloak, and his two friends made excuses to leave before they became the subject of Helios’ attentions, Maximian looked enigmatically at Sandra and then paid no more attention to her as he went to the door. The two nervous visitors hurried out ahead of him, after bidding Helios a brisk farewell.

When they were gone Helios called, “General, because the Lady Ancaris is my friend, I know nothing of what is going on in the countryside here. I tell you this, so you may leave at once for Vespasian’s headquarters and point out to him that I, a loyal subject of the present emperor, may be of use in future as I was in the past . . . to the emperor. Do I make myself clear?”

“I take it that the name of the emperor is immaterial to you,” Max said as he was leaving.

Helios agreed. “How well we understand each other!”

The next half hour seemed endless to Sandra. She received the mended but clean cape from Phaon and tried to stay as close to him as possible. But whenever she walked across the room, Helios either moved, always slightly nearer, or taunted

her, reminding her of that nightmare time in his Palatine apartment.

"I see you haven't forgotten your old master, have you?"

She ignored his voice and tried to ignore his presence, but she jumped nervously when he touched her hip, running his finger over the firm, round curve and complaining, "Dreadful material in this cloak. Phaon, have you nothing better?"

Trying to enlist Phaon's help, Sandra moved toward him as he stuck his head out the window embrasure. "Is it time? Do you see anything?"

Phaon gave the eunuch a glance.

"Anytime. Soon."

Sandra looked out at the wind-swept blue skies and prayed, "Whatever gods are up there on Olympus, help me. No. Help us," because she still couldn't believe Max would let her return to Rome in the hands of the eunuch.

Helios sauntered over to the intricate water clock, followed the markings, and said what Sandra had been dreading: "I'm afraid our friend General Maximian isn't quite as keen to oblige me as I'd hoped. The half hour is up."

Phaon turned angrily, trying to hide his own fears. "He probably figures there is no reason for him to carry out your orders, if you are taking away his mistress anyhow."

"But I thought he would understand. If the girl went with Domitian and me, she would be in far better hands than if I alone were to escort her. My legionary guard being hungry for pretty women, after their long sojourn on the Rhine."

Sandra told herself she had known it all along, but still she hoped, and was not too surprised when Phaon, hearing something outside, turned to the window again and announced triumphantly, "He's coming. And with the young Lord Domitian."

Even Helios showed a rare interest. He pushed Phaon away, muttered, "It is settled then. I wasn't sure," and added fervently, "The Lord Domitian won't be sorry. He will be welcomed with open arms when the emperor arrives."

Sandra wondered if it was only an enormous conceit that made her think one of the reasons Domitian returned to Rome was that she would be his property. He and General Max were walking. They came alone. She hadn't really expected an army to rescue her, but this looked very much as if Max might plan to buy her from his wife, as he had said. And meanwhile? Days, weeks, months in the possession of a

woman who hated her and a volatile man who wanted her too much.

She swung around, got a good look at the tablinum and the inner peristyle beyond. No way out in that direction. But the city was still in turmoil. Surely there would be one chance for escape. She knew the Palatine well now, and could find her way around the city itself. She had seen the cubicle of a bedroom that was Theron's "home" in the palace, and was reasonably sure he would help her. Daphne too might have some power, now that she was a freedwoman and would be bound to make her way with Otho's successor.

Having made up her mind, she sternly planned to carry out her own plan. She was certain Max loved her and would make some effort of his own. But she might have to help him, by her initiative. She prepared herself by steeling her muscles, remaining alert to any opportunity. Discouragement and defeat were gone.

General Maximian and Domitian walked around to the heavy front door. Domitian appeared delighted at his return to Rome. He glittered in full uniform, and his step was so military he looked older than his age. Max's face was harder to read. He remained in a tunic and short travel cape and had no weapon in evidence, but he had changed to his high-laced marching boots. Was there anything significant in that?

She saw movements far across the fields on the Ostian Way. The legionaries no longer threw dice. They were now alert. Several horses had been brought forward. The decurion himself was mounted, although he would normally have marched beside his men. Sandra had no doubt she would be placed on one of those horses, possibly with Domitian. How proud he would be, galloping into Rome in full uniform as a legion commander!

Meanwhile, Max appeared before her suddenly in the doorway. She sensed that Helios watched them, and Max gave her no reason for hope except that steady, unblinking look he had given her earlier and repeated now. Surely, it was a code message: "Be ready." Or "Trust me." She remained alert.

It was Domitian who nudged Max aside and saluted her smartly with his fist against his breast armor, trying not to let his triumphant grin spoil the solemnity of his entrance.

"So this is my new property!" he play-acted, looking her over. He went on, seeing the apprehension she couldn't hide,

"I always get what I want. I always have. It's just the waiting that's hard. You aren't afraid of me, are you?"

In spite of herself, she shrank from him when he took her arm, but he felt it and promised her in a loud whisper, "You'll forget all about Max when you've lain with me. Max, clear the way. I'm taking my property back to the Palatine."

This time Sandra noticed the momentary anger of her lover before he agreed, all too politely, "As you wish, Domitian." He started back out and down the irregular, rush-grown path to the great Ostian highway across the fields. Sandra concentrated on other things rather than Domitian beside her. She remembered suddenly that she had crossed this field the night of Nero's death. She had been more despairing then, for she hadn't known she loved Maximian.

When they reached the edge of the busy highway, Max stopped in front of Sandra. "I'll leave you here. But one of these days I'll have you back from Ancaris. She is always willing to turn a profit."

Helios had other ideas.

"Not quite yet, if you don't mind, general. We will feel much safer if you accompany us to the Ostian Gateway, since this isn't exactly loyal territory."

Sandra knew they had left Rome by the Appian Way, where the officials were sympathetic to the Vespasian cause. Now they returned by the nearer and more logical gateway. But she had no doubt these guards were chosen by Vitellius' Rhine legions. They might even intend to take Max prisoner on some pretext, such as his lack of identifying uniform. He was undisturbed, however, and she could almost think he invited Helios' command.

"As you wish, Lord Helios." If the title was ironically pronounced, the chamberlain pretended not to notice.

Domitian mounted the black mare held for him, and lifted Sandra up before him. He was a good horseman, and she knew he had been a good soldier, but she couldn't control the longing she felt to be beside Max, who now marched in the midst of four Rhine legionaries toward the Ostian Gateway of the city. Domitian drew her back against his chest, nearly unseating her.

"Don't look to old Max for help. You will be a far happier woman once you've learned how to please me. I'm not a bad sort. You can take care of Ancaris' baby now and then. You'll like that. In fact, I may not even ask you to change the color of your hair. I'm beginning to prefer it this way."

He added this with his hopeful smile, but she sensed in it the old ambivalence, full of suspicions. No matter how far he climbed, he always remembered that his father and his elder brother had reached higher goals, and gotten there first.

Even in the case of this slave woman, he was not the first. Maximian, the other object of his jealousy and envy, had taken her before Domitian could show her what real passion was. He proved she had read his thoughts correctly when he tightened his arm under her breasts and with his lips close to her ear, murmured, "I'm younger than Max. I've still got the juices of life to give. Not like Max and Titus, who are old and dried up."

She made no response to that, hoping he would think she hadn't heard him. She watched Max marching between his captors, and prayed for his safety. She had lived through sexual degradation before and survived, but if they murdered Maximian, she thought her life would no longer be worth the struggle.

They were still several miles from the Ostian entrance to the capital and moving with difficulty against the tide of civilians loaded down with their furnishings of a lifetime when Sandra became aware that a score of these fleeing men seemed to have bunched together on the road in front of Domitian and the other horsemen. Pushing and shoving, using sharp-legged stools and other household items, this disciplined mob moved inexorably against the horsemen.

The horses panicked, and the horsemen, Helios, the decurion, and Domitian were caught by surprise. The decurion shouted orders that were drowned out by the mob, which seemed to have but one object, a forward thrust. When the horses' hooves trampled one of the mob, others shrieked, "Savages in uniform! German savages trying to murder good citizens!"

Although several of the legionaries were Italian, these cries got the support from the crowd making their way in the same direction. The soldiers, who had formed a square around Max, obviously to hold him prisoner, were now beset on all sides as the mob pushed onward, still armed with stools, scythes, small tables like shields, and every conceivable piece of furniture for a weapon.

Helios' small bay horse sprang ahead, throwing off the chamberlain. He rolled beyond the wild hooves and lay there shuddering, with his face covered, while Domitian's mare

reared and Domitian held the reins tight around Sandra and himself.

"German assassin!" a voice cried of Domitian as Sandra was dragged from his arms. Domitian vaulted quickly to the pavement with his sword out, the bright, double-edged blade cutting and thrusting. Sandra screamed as she was swung into midair and she caught glimpses of the shambles around her. The legionaries were surrounded, and two of them had laid down their arms. The others fought only halfheartedly.

Two of the attackers leaped onto the prisoner, Maximian. There was a brief struggle, then they moved away, and Max lay at the side of the road, a cut across his cheek and what appeared to be blood running into his hairline.

Sandra had not seen him hurt and suspected this was a prearranged "wound" so that the mob of attackers would not be identified as soldiers of Vespasian.

Helios had a swelling lump on his cheek and he nursed an injured arm, but he staggered over the paving stones to examine Max's body suspiciously. After studying him, the eunuch felt around over the paving stones, picked up the sword dropped by one of the fallen legionaries, and raised it with both hands squeezing the hilt to bring it down in Max's body. Sandra cried out. Max rolled aside just as the shining blade descended close to his shoulder. Sandra caught her breath in terror. Max tried to rise, but failed.

Helios dropped the sword. He seemed satisfied that this injury was genuine and staggered off toward Domitian farther down the road.

Sandra saw that Max's eyes were open and his hands closed, tightening into fists, as if in pain. She hoped against hope that he was still play-acting. She couldn't tell whether he had actually been wounded by the eunuch's swordthrust. If there was any telltale blood, she couldn't see it. Certainly the temple injury hadn't been real. He had reacted too fast to Helios' swordthrust.

The eunuch was trying to rouse his fallen legionaries now, shaking them with all the strength he could muster.

Frantic to reach Max, Sandra began to struggle again in the arms of her unknown attackers—or were they rescuers? She saw Domitian energetically trying to fight his way toward her. It was curious that no one stabbed or struck him from the rear. This score of "citizens" seemed anxious to subdue but not to hurt him. She told herself this was further proof that they were Max's men and would never harm the younger

son of their emperor, Vespasian. It took two of them to disarm Domitian without resorting to further violence.

One of the attackers yelled, "Hold! He's a Roman," and with this, they agreed, "He's coming with us. A hostage." But Domitian fought so wildly, writhing and kicking, and clearly not understanding their intent, that his attackers almost lost their hold on him.

At this moment Helios reached the group around Domitian. His Rhine legionaries cut their way through to Domitian, who, being disarmed, was soon knocked down by Helios' men.

"Pick him up," Helios directed. "His sister is a friend of Emperor Vitellius."

The attackers who would have carried him off to safety, had been badly nicked and sliced by this unexpected resistance. They backed away to nurse their wounds, leaving Domitian once more a palace prisoner in the hands of Helios.

Sandra was too concerned over Max to give more than a brief worried glance at the legionaries, who carried the now struggling Domitian to one of the horses.

Another of the attackers kicked at the supposedly wounded Max. "Take this one along. He's not in uniform." The attacker explained with a grin, "Probably a German spy from those Rhine legions." He pointed to the disheveled legionaries who were busy carrying Domitian up the road.

Sandra screamed, "It's not true. He's a Roman like you," and tried to get to Max. But a foul-smelling cloth was stuffed in her mouth and a second later somebody threw her cloak over her head, so she could see nothing more. She still did not know whether the attackers were Max's men, or merely wandering troublemakers hoping to hold her and Max for ransom.

Chapter Six

A pair of rough hands lifted her off the ground again and she was carried at a fast running pace for an eternity of ten minutes or so before she was lifted again, this time into the bottom of a wagon. Several of the attackers piled in around her, and she expected to be kicked and roughed up at the least, but no one touched her. She clawed at the cloth in her mouth, got it out finally, and nursed her sore tongue and dry lips for a minute before she began to work on the cloak that covered her.

By this time she could concentrate on the men who shared the wagon with her. They no longer sounded like a civilian mob, and her hopes began to rise. A tough, familiar voice made her think suddenly of Gaul, her journey with Daphne and Enobarbus, the centurion in Max's service. Was this Enobarbus?

"They left the blood on the paving stones. It's bound to look good."

"I saw that accursed eunuch examine Max. He's convinced."

"I wish I'd slit the gullet of that eunuch. He's going to be nothing but trouble."

"The more we killed, the more the Pig would send to look for us. Too bad they took young Domitian. Probably use him as a hostage. Max is going to be good and mad. But I'd as soon be clawed by a Numidian cat as handle that one. Besides, being inside Rome he might get information we could use."

They called their leader Max. They were his men. Enobarbus and the others had actually rescued her and General Maximian. She rejoiced without having any idea what was happening or would happen. Experimentally, she fingered the cloak, looking for the hem, and found it at last. She slipped it up, peeked out, saw Enobarbus' friendly, rugged face almost touching her nose.

"Feel better?"

She pretended disgust.

"You might have said something. You had me thinking terrible things." But she couldn't keep up the pretense. "Oh, Enobarbus, is he badly hurt? Tell me the truth!"

The old soldier reassured her. "Not General Max. We got up this idea while your admirer, Lord Domitian, was fancying up in a shiny uniform. We were planning to meet with Phaon anyway, so we did this instead. Served the same purpose."

She sat up, rubbing her sore arms, her shoulder, and one cramped foot. She began to get a better look at her companions. Now that they had thrown off cloaks and farm implements, they were obviously soldiers, even in bloused tunics stinking of stale fish, animal ordure, and some blood, human and other. She twisted around, saw the weapons of farm and villa piled in one corner of the wagon, which was no more than a two-wheeled cart and rocked so much she nearly felt seasick. It was a ridiculous collection of weapons, yet it had been formidable. She laughed, and her companions joined in.

In spite of the swaying of the cart, the very sound of that hearty laughter healed most of her bruises and even lifted the black dread under which she had lived since the terrible night in Lutetia when her world turned upside down.

"I knew he wouldn't let me go back to Rome as his wife's property," she lied. "And you all working for General Vespasian?"

Enobarbus and the others exchanged looks. He corrected her. "The emperor is on the frontier defending Rome. We—most of us—have served under him and General Titus or General Max. We just happen to be gathering recruits here." Several men guffawed, and Enobarbus pointed out, "Can we help it if recruits are plentiful since the Pig's men seized Rome?"

Sandra agreed, and said emphatically, "Whatever you are doing, I am for Vespasian. I met him once in Greece."

But they were too busy looking back, discussing pursuit, to pay any more attention to her.

"It's a cohort of legionaries," one of the men decided. "They're following us. What a mob of them!"

Someone else said, "Black Tartarus take the bastards! They couldn't have gotten their horses this quick. I sent that mare galloping halfway to Ostia. And we didn't dare kill young Domitian, anyway."

"Mark me, that boy's going to be trouble for the imperator before he's through."

They looked around glumly, sharing a common mistrust of Domitian, Sandra's legitimate new master.

"But where is General Maximian?" she asked Enobarbus, who stood up in the cart, barely keeping his balance by a sudden grab at the high, splintering side.

He dismissed her question as a triviality. "Later. Later. It was necessary to take different highways. To throw them off the scent. Max had to be carried away as if he were a wounded prisoner of ours. Otherwise they would know he was in on this."

The two oxen pulling the heavy cart wandered near the edge of the highway, which, though well paved like most Roman roads, had seen so much traffic it was never completely smooth. The men in the cart cursed absentmindedly as they fell against each other, but they were casual about it. They were too busy watching the ominous approach of the horsemen.

By the time the soldiers reached the cart they proved to be soldiers from the local barracks, and one of them shouted across to these jolting farmers, "Still running away? No need. Just take the oath to the latest of our immortal Caesars and you're safe in Rome. The Pig's new prefect is in control."

The men in the cart thanked these soldiers respectfully, but their driver, holding the lines and guiding the stolid oxen, kept going. They all breathed with relief when the soldiers rode on.

Enobarbus reminded his men, "They still call him the Pig. I don't think it would take much to get the Italian legions on our side."

"Have to get word to them first," one of the men pointed out. "All we can do is approach the soldiers we find, and stay away from the Rhine legions."

"Max says there's cohorts from seven legions ready to set sail from Syria and Palestine. Just waiting for Vespasian's order."

"Bad winds can keep them back for weeks."

"True enough. But it's my belief the whole city will rise up for Vespasian when they know he's within reach. Young Domitian told Max the Palatine servants are too cowardly to protect Vitellius, and the Praetorians will betray the Pig just as they betrayed Otho and Galba and Nero."

"Accursed Praetorians need a strong hand to overhaul them."

They used to be the elite corps when Tigellinus had them in charge. Those first years under Nero weren't bad."

Somebody jeered. "Our singing emperor? The gods forbid!"

"I mean before he learned to sing."

They all laughed, and Sandra felt the contagion of this political enthusiasm. She touched Enobarbus' torn and mud-stained sleeve, asking, "Are we returning to Acté's house?"

"First place they'll look. And then they'll go through every farm and villa in the Campania, trying to find some signs of us. No. We're going much farther, Sandra." He caught himself, remembering orders from Maximian. "Lady Lysandra, that is. Anyway, Acté thinks the safest place is Nero's deserted villa at Baiae, on the Lucrine Lake. She will wait until Helios or the others pay her a visit on the farm. Then she will go to the villa at Baiae when the danger is over. You'll have no trouble. She sent a message to her servants. They're loyal. They all belong to some secret oriental religion."

Sandra, who suspected this was the dreaded Christian sect, agreed. "I know her people. They would never betray her."

"It's the best place we could think of for the moment. Max hopes to get Vespasian on the march immediately. That means Max might get him to free you, Lady Sandra, if he takes Rome in the next couple of months."

"Not another civil war with all that blood in the streets and Ancaris and her baby in Vitellius' power on the Palatine!"

Enobarbus shrugged. "She seems safe enough, she and Domitian. Vespasian will make a deal. Their safety for that of Vitellius. The pig ought to fall in with that. Anyway, this time we're not dealing with an idiot conqueror like those we've had since Nero's early days. Vespasian will be a decent emperor. You'll see."

"And the child Maximian disowns?" But even as Sandra asked the question, she knew these hardened soldiers had no interest in a bastard child who was clearly not the son of their commander.

Enobarbus shrugged as she had expected. Some of his men laughed and nudged each other. One of them spoke up.

"Max'd probably thank us if we got rid of the little bastard. Small loss there. What Max is aiming for anyway is to divorce that bitch Ancaris."

Enobarbus said, "It won't be easy. Vespasian would as soon kill anyone as look at them, if they ruined his precious

Ancaris. He sure doesn't want his best general throwing aside his only daughter. It would ruin her in Rome, with all the scandal. If you ask me, that's the only reason Ancaris didn't have an abortion. A child gives her leverage when she tries to influence her father."

Another of Max's men pointed out, "And it wouldn't help Vespasian any when he tries to restore some kind of decency on the Palatine. But Max thinks he can do it, and we're not about to point out the difficulties."

Sandra had to be satisfied, but she wished she could be as optimistic as these soldiers were about the future success of their conquering hero Vespasian. She thought back to that hour in the Greek amphitheater when he had slept through Nero's performance. Not very diplomatic; yet he had been courageous and admirable in his way. She suspected he might make a good ruler. But not at the price of still another civil war.

"If only Maximian is safe," she murmured, getting back to more immediate problems.

Enobarbus assured her again. "General Max planned our attack this way, you know. 'Divide the groups into three when it's over,' he said. Some of our men had mounts hidden in that grove on Phaon's farm. And others would get away on foot, so the trail would be mixed when Helios and his gang try to follow. We'll meet Max along the way, soon as he's thrown off the chase."

"But he did seem wounded, the second time. Helios tried to stab him."

"Not Max. He planned to look wounded. He may have to deal with Helios and the others again. He wanted it to look as if he had been attacked with the rest of us. All that stuff on his face was chicken blood. That's all."

"Still, I think Helios did strike him. Helios raised the sword—"

"Easy, girl," Enobarbus advised her toughly. "Max has been in plenty of rough spots. He'll get out of this. He's probably waiting for us at the tavern. It's run by a friend of Vespasian. We're safe there for a few hours."

It was consoling to hear this, whether he was right or not.

The journey to Baiae would take several days by this slow-moving cart, and after only a few hours, Sandra found her body more bruised and sore than it had ever been in her life. But at least she was being carried away from the slavery and the masters she feared. The farther south they moved,

the more confident she felt. Max would be waiting at the tavern. Everyone around her seemed more and more sure of it. They joked and laughed and talked about the invincible Max until she believed it herself, wondering again that she could ever have doubted him during that terrible year after she was enslaved.

The cart finally pulled into a tavern yard just off the main Roman highway to Baiae, Antium, and other resorts on the elite little inlet from the Bay of Neapolis. It was after dark, and the landlord himself led the oxen away after inviting Max's friends to make free of the food. "There's fresh fish and bread and a haunch of kid on the coals," he said.

"We can smell it from here, Nico."

"And what a smell!" another of Max's men agreed. "The gods don't eat better on Olympus than the friends of Nicodemus."

Enobarbus helped Sandra down in the stony yard, and she limped into the warm, welcome main room of the tavern. Gossip gave such places a murderous reputation. Rich travelers and government couriers had their own residences or posthouses. But though this place might be a thieves' den on ordinary occasions, for all Sandra knew, she was relieved to have arrived and began to look around for Max.

The men swarmed through the big main room of the tavern, stamping dried mud off their heavy sandals and warming their palms and backsides at the brickwork oven, where, as the innkeeper had promised, a haunch of young kid browned, the rich fat spitting onto the red-hot stones below. There were loud sniffs of enjoyment among Max's soldiers, and Sandra understood their hunger very well, but though she might share it later, there was still no sign of Maximian. That worried her.

She walked around the room, looked up the single narrow staircase to whatever flea-infested, mosquito-ridden rooms might be held for unlucky travelers who hadn't planned their day's journey any better. When the innkeeper, Nicodemus, came back into the house in a hurry to feed his friends, she got in his way, and while he stared at her, surprised to see a woman among these boisterous comrades, she asked in a low voice, "Has General Maximian arrived yet? Is he safe?"

Nicodemus looked from her to the soldiers, several of whom ignored him. They were too busy burning their fingers as they reached into the oven to sample the meat, or peel off the skin of the big trout baking beside the kid. Enobarbus

heard her question, however, and asked with a casualness that Sandra suspected was put on, "Well, Nico, is he resting? The eunuch chamberlain of the Palatine tried to stab him, I hear."

But the innkeeper had no news. "Haven't seen him. He must've taken the Appian Way. Was he due here tonight? Glad to see Max. I served under him three years ago when he ran things at that damned pit of Tartarus in Syria."

Conscious of Sandra's attention, Enobarbus dismissed the latter all too easily. "You never know. There were three parties. He must've taken the long way."

The innkeeper took up cloths, wrapped his hands, and reached in to hold up the dripping, succulent haunch of meat. "Hope he gets here soon. Or he'll get nothing but leftovers, judging by the appetite of your hungry lions here."

The men crowded around him, slapping him on the back, urging that each of them get the first slice of meat, promising endless treasures for the bounty. Only Enobarbus was less easy over their adventure. Sandra asked him, "Can anything have happened?"

"We saw him picked up by our own men," Enobarbus reminded her. He repeated this firmly. To reassure himself? She knew he didn't want her troubling him with her contagious suspicions, but she couldn't help one more question.

"Is there any way you can find out? Send someone on the other roads, check to see if he is safe?"

He patted her shoulder. "General Max knows what he's doing. He's probably galloping along now, having a fine time of it, and knowing we are all safe. Sit down somewhere and I'll bring you a dish of meat and some of those olives. Raisins, too, by Zeus! You'll feel better when you've eaten. He wouldn't want you making—that is—"

"Making trouble for his men. I know. I'm sorry."

She knew she owed these soldiers a great deal. One of the main objects of that attack on Helios and his troop had been her rescue, masterminded by Maximian. She couldn't afford to antagonize these friends who had sacrificed so much, partly for her, chiefly to help Max.

She kept very quiet, sitting in a corner by the warped shutter of the room's only window. She tried to watch the road through the broken splinters of wood and was glad of the starlight that gave her some slight view. If Maximian and his friends came, she would be able to see them first. The soldiers around her were a lively, joking, eating lot. For a while

she wondered if they even thought or cared about their commander.

Enobarbus brought her a plate heaped with food. She was even more grateful for the handclasp he gave her and the friendly consolation.

"Mark me, girl, he's got nine lives. I've seen him use up two or three myself. Only last winter in the Anatolian steppes he took a pilum thrust that would have gone clean through an ordinary man. But he was on his feet again in a matter of weeks. Now, you just get right to eating and you'll feel better. Things won't look so dark."

I've got to make plans, she thought, if anything has happened and he is dead. But I've only just learned to love him. I can't give him up. He's got to be safe.

She broke off pieces of meat in her fingers, then took olives and raisins and, later, a bit of fish. The delicate creamy meat of the fish went down easier. All the same, she was glad when she saw a wine cup on the brick hearth. She got up and poured half a cupful from the big amphora set in a hole on the rack against the wall, and drank quickly, then made a face. It was sour, vinegary posca. No matter. It gave her courage of a sort.

I must depend on myself, not Maximian or these other good men, she thought. If he was hurt today—gods, please don't let it be so!—it was because of me, whatever he may have told his men. And I can never let him risk so much for me again.

Enobarbus said he couldn't be dead. She would cling to that hope. But if she had to go on alone, maybe Claudia Acté would have connections in Greece and she could get a job as an amanuensis. She had the experience. She had helped her father copy manuscripts and reports. Somehow she would make a life for herself.

But another sadness haunted her. What if she never saw her father's son again? There were few people who needed her. Certainly not General Maximian. Her need for him was far greater. But the child Flavius . . . she was convinced that Ancaris only permitted that painful birth and the encumbrance involved in his physical presence because her father was sure to adore his grandchild. Vespasian would probably go to any lengths to protect the child's illustrious name as son of the distinguished Maximian Claudius House. The minute Max denied young Flavius, he would ruin the future of Vespasian's grandchild forever.

Poor, laughing little Flavius! He was bound to suffer when Max divorced his wife and tried to marry a slave woman. There was a deep irony in the fact that if he legitimized Sandra's position in the world, Max would very likely make a bastard of Perseus' only son.

After pouring and drinking another half cup of posca, she silently reminded herself, I don't even know if General Max is hurt. I can only think about his safety right now.

Max's soldiers had finished eating, and as the innkeeper guessed, the evening's food was gone, but Nicodemus, seeing Sandra's nervous look at the low-burning coals, confided, "I put some aside. General Max won't starve. Not in my house."

"Thank you. You are very good."

"He takes care of his men. We take care of him. That's the way of it."

"He should be here by now, shouldn't he?"

Nicodemus shrugged. "Maybe his group led the pursuit away from you. He'd do that if he wanted to protect his men."

She heard a new disturbance, horsemen riding over the ground between the highway and the inn. She welcomed the sound, swinging around to look out the window. The men were not in uniform, so they must be Max's men. Thanks be to Mercury, that crafty god with winged feet! She got up, set aside the plate of half-eaten food, and rushed to the door. She was quickly surrounded by Enobarbus and the men who had brought her this far.

The five horsemen dismounted amid shouts of self-congratulation, and left their tired, lathered horses in the care of one of their number while they tramped toward Nicodemus. The innkeeper greeted them in the doorway.

The worst moment for Sandra came when one of the horsemen slapped the innkeeper on the back and demanded, "Let me by. Got to see if General Max has eaten all my bread and pork. Gods, but I'm starved! And I've a thirst that would drink up the Tiber!"

Enobarbus voiced everyone's question. "He's not with you?"

"You mean his group ~~isn't~~ here yet?" The newcomer looked around, but rapidly cast off fears. "He just led the trail east, I expect. Innkeeper, what's for supper?" He went on inside. The other horsemen followed him, glancing around as if expecting to see their commander, and then looking at

each other. Like Sandra, they felt that something was wrong but went on pretending nothing interested them except food.

Sandra stood outside in the starlight with Phaon's cloak wrapped around her.

I wasted a year hating him, she reminded herself. And now, I'm in terror because something may have happened to him.

She stood there undisturbed while the new arrivals ate up the remains of the supper prepared by Nicodemus. When Enobarbus joined her later she wasn't aware of his presence behind her until he spoke.

"Nico has an old four-wheeled wagon we can borrow and go on. Tonight. Can you travel? The closer we get to Baiae, the more likely we are to locate General Max."

She said flatly, "You think he is hurt, and they will take him where there are physicians. Isn't that it?"

Enobarbus rubbed his unshaven chin. "Of course. But don't you go thinking he's dead, which is what you are doing right now, isn't it?"

"I can't help it. It's a habit. I used to be optimistic, quite ridiculously so. I never even questioned where my father got large sums of money. I never dreamed a freeborn human being could become a slave. I fell in love with General Maximian when I met him in Lutetia. That was why it seemed so horrible when he betrayed me." Her smile softened her features in the starlight. "I should say—you and he betrayed me."

Enobarbus protested, "I didn't. I swear I was set upon in Lugdunum. They left me for dead."

"They were sent by the Lady Ancaris. I'm convinced of it . . . No matter. I owe the general so much."

But for Max and his wild band of Vespasian men, she would be spending tonight either in Domitian's bed or in the hands of a woman who hated her and held over her the power of torture and death.

"I'll go anywhere, at once. The minute you all agree to leave."

"Good. Better come in and get warm while the boys pull themselves together."

Surprisingly enough, they pulled themselves together and were ready to leave in half an hour. She was waiting when the oxen rumbled across the pebbled soil and Enobarbus opened the narrow wooden door of the wagon for her. The

horsemen mounted. They had decided to ride three behind the wagon, two ahead.

"In that way," Enobarbus explained, "they can give the signal from either direction and we'll join forces to defend ourselves. Not that we're likely to have trouble. The Pig's legions don't have much power yet, south of Rome." He grinned, raised his voice so the others heard his boast. "And if we have anything to say about it, they never will."

She climbed into the wagon with the men who had rescued her on the Ostian Way. Enobarbus got in last. The wagon, which had a wooden roof, a door, and two windows leather-covered at this hour, was barely large enough for the five men who accompanied her. But once the oxen got started on their stubborn, plodding way, it was far more comfortable inside than it had been in the two-wheeled, rattling cart.

The men curled up on the rush-covered bottom of the wagon and, to Sandra's surprise and envy, went to sleep. Somebody, probably Enobarbus, had put in a heavy blanket and several bolsters for Sandra. She hesitated at first, recalling all too well the conduct of other soldiers locked in with a woman, but it soon became obvious that they would never hurt Maximian's mistress.

Or maybe it was because, in her slave's gown and cloak, she offered little attraction to them. Either way, she felt safe and eventually went to sleep curled up in the blanket, having thrown two of the three bolsters to the men, who managed very well with them, sleeping ear to ear, with dusty sandaled feet stretched out in opposite directions.

During that night and the next Sandra found her memories of the Roman soldier in Gaul blurred to nothingness. She saw in her daylight travels with these men who served Maximian that they did not find her completely unattractive. They flirted, brought her choice morsels of food or the bright spring daffodils and iris growing wild along the roadside; yet they did not assault her or attempt any familiarities. Their loyalty to their commander was one restraint.

By the time they approached the sprawling Baiae villa once inhabited by Emperor Nero and his hedonist friends, Sandra knew her companions fairly well. She not only trusted them but they were beginning to regard her as a kind of legion mother. At the age of nineteen she found this amusing and enjoyed it enormously. In these few days and nights she had returned to the hopeful optimism of her youth.

Then, on the fourth morning, the two horsemen riding

ahead within sight of the sparkling little Bay of Baiae wheeled around and returned to urge more speed by the wagon with Sandra, Enobarbus, and her other new friends.

Enobarbus threw the leather curtain aside and stuck his head out of the wagon window.

"What's the problem, Manlius? You look like a tiger got your tail."

The horsemen leaned over, said a few words that sent Enobarbus stiffly upright, and then rode back along the highway to hurry the three horsemen following. Enobarbus gave orders to the driver skillfully managing the oxen, and turned to Sandra.

"You were in the right of it, Lady Sandra. General Max has been hurt. It was the eunuch who stabbed him. He'll be all right though, soon as he gets a little care."

She was relieved. This was better than her worst fear, of his death.

"Is there no one to look after him at Acté's villa?"

"Just caretakers. A few servants. Claudia Acté's, due here as soon as she feels the Pig's men will not follow her. She doesn't want them getting an idea of where Max is. But the Pig's men don't know much about Acté or her properties."

"Hurry!"

Enobarbus and Max's other men shared her anxiety, but after two of them looked out, they assured her, "Another turn or two and we're there."

"Just tell them it's the general's life," she added unnecessarily. They were already on their way.

Sandra wasn't soothed by Enobarbus' reasoning. True, the Rhine legionaries knew nothing about Acté's connection with the Baiae villa, but any Roman familiar with Nero's principate could tell them.

Chapter Seven

Nero's villa had begun as a country home, with long terraces overlooking the beautiful waters below, an ideal escape from the damp miasma of winter in Rome and the malarial heat of summer. But Nero's passion for building had caught up the lovely villa until it was as elaborate, and nearly as intricate, as the buildings on the Palatine which had been added to by every emperor from Augustus to Nero.

Since she was hardly dressed to enter a palace, Sandra expected to be turned back at the great brass-and-iron-bound double doors which were framed by Corinthian columns so elaborate they appeared a mockery to Sandra. However, the doorkeeper, a Jew or Syrian wearing a simple ankle-length himation, merely waved her inside with a grave smile. Enobarbus joined her now, but the mere mention of Claudia Acté's name was enough for the usher, a powerful black ex-gladiator who had been purchased and freed by Acté. The black wore a small almond-shaped symbol embroidered on his long himation. The Sign of the Fish.

Enobarbus pointed it out to Sandra and whispered, "The Greek word for 'fish' spells out an Eastern religion. When I was with Titus, fighting the Jewish rebels, I ran across it among both Jews and Gentiles, as they call us."

She was afraid to speak the word "Christian" aloud. She knew all the crimes attributed to them, and the ferocious punishment meted out to these "baby-killers" who met now in caves, it was said. Nothing seemed to stamp them out. But it was hard to picture a woman like Acté or quiet, gentle men like these servants joining a society responsible for such crimes.

It was hard to keep from running when she was so close to the injured Maximian, but the usher strode ahead of her without undignified haste. She couldn't get around him. And Enobarbus also slowed her with a hand on her forearm.

"Don't panic. Be easy. General Max is going to need you."

"This place!" she complained, wanting to vent her anger and fear on something. "Look at those columns. Just in one corridor. Enough marble to build a house. And that enormous room over there. What can they possibly use it for? Chariot races?"

"An audience chamber. It's historic, that room. They say it's where Nero first overcame his mother during a public reception. She'd been running the empire any way she pleased. But one day in that room he took away her power, as neat as you please. He wasn't a bad fellow in those days."

Remembering the Nero who used an assault on her to stimulate his stage performance, she could find nothing about him that was anything but loathsome.

"All that power did for him in the end, I expect," Enobarbus summed it up.

She looked straight ahead, avoiding the centurion's excuses, concentrating on the golden sunlight that glittered over the waters beyond the marble terrace. She tried to find in all this beauty some sign that the gods were with Max. They would restore him. "Bright Apollo, help him!"

The usher stepped aside after opening another pair of towering double doors. Sandra rushed in with Enobarbus at her side. The huge bedchamber must have belonged to one of Nero's wives, probably the glamorous Poppaea Sabina. It was a mass of silk, Phoenician gauze, and satins, over couches, the floor, tabarets, and long storage chests. Satin had even been hung at the long windows that opened on the terrace beneath. These draperies blew softly in and out with the breeze.

"It might be too cold. I'll put up the shutters," Enobarbus volunteered.

"No!" She couldn't bear to have Max lying in darkness. The omens were much better in the sunlight.

She reached the couch, where Max had been laid out exactly like a body arranged for the funeral pyre. There seemed to be very little blood, just a bruise across his left temple that looked all colors of the rainbow, but when she took off the old farmers' cloak he had been using, she could only gasp. The stab wound had gone deep into the flesh and possibly the bone of his left shoulder just below the collarbone. Blood had coagulated thickly over the wound, and the stain was dark. Had his lung been touched?

His breathing was hoarse and uneven. Some well-meaning, superstitious fraud had placed burning papers on his chest in

the hope that either the smoke or the burned papers themselves would be absorbed by his body.

"Haven't they done anything practical?" she demanded, looking around for slaves to carry out her orders. Two elderly men came to the couch. Their robes were alive with silver zodiacal signs, and both men managed to look distinguished in spite of their absurd high conical hats.

"Daughter," the tall, heavy-set physician addressed her solemnly, "at the head of the general's couch you will see our neats' tongues, the feces of an owl, the hearts of mating doves." She shuddered, and the second physician, small and lean, added hastily, "But all these elements have been carefully mixed with theriaca, which, as you may not be aware, is a combination of over sixty potent elements, including the poison of a newly cupped adder."

It all sounded very professional, but she was frantic over the implications. "You didn't let him swallow poison, surely!"

Both physicians denied this with raised arms and expressions of horror.

"Never, daughter! These elements are burned. It is this essence which rises to the Olympian sky, an offering to the gods, if you will."

"True," the big, stout one admitted. "Many physicians of less renown than my admirable colleague and myself have fed these elements to their patients. The rate of cure is far from encouraging."

"I'm not surprised," she muttered, but thanked both men, who bowed and moved away, to her relief. They placed themselves in a distant alcove, congratulating each other on their perspicacity.

Sandra turned to Enobarbus. "I have my own superstitions, it is true, but I also believe in practical efforts. Please ask a female to come in with warm water, cloths, and unguents. Iced water or snow, if any has been brought in from the mountains lately. We'll try these remedies first. Cleaning the wound, treating it with unguents."

Enobarbus nudged her. "The Babylonians have worked cures for ages. Are you sure—?"

Somehow, Max had also received the head wound. It might not be serious, but if it was the head injury that made him lose consciousness, this could be even more dangerous than the stab wound.

Gently, she tried to arouse General Max and had no time to argue with anyone else. When one of her father's slaves

had been struck on the head by a falling harpagus, the pronged boarding hook used on shipboard, she remembered that only a disturbance of his deadly sleep had saved him. Several learned slaves worked on him, and the most successful remedy had been simply the effort to arouse the unlucky patient.

Considering this, she said, "We must bring the general to consciousness as soon as we've washed the wounds. I've seen these deep sleeps before. He mustn't be allowed to remain like this."

Enobarbus had gone to the usher in the corridor. He didn't hear her warning, but when he came back after carrying out her first orders, she repeated the importance of rousing Maximian from this deep and deadly sleep. He relieved her by saying, "One of the general's aides, Ilarion, says he rode the entire first night and the next day with that stab wound. Just said it was stiff. He kept insisting the trail mustn't lead back to the men who were getting away with you. So his crowd led the Rhine legionaries southeast. They lost them the second morning after the fight."

"When did he collapse?"

"Last night, when he and his men stopped for a cup of posca. Just fell over when he got inside the tavern. He hasn't come out of it since."

She had been afraid of worse, a longer period of unconsciousness. She set to work with the towels and the steaming water. All the while, she talked to Maximian, because she couldn't resist it and in the general hope that her voice would reach him. The icewater on his forehead had better results. He blinked and groaned, finally his lips moved. He murmured, "Good," and closed his eyes again.

Enobarbus said gruffly, "He's gone into a regular sleep now. He'll be safe. I've seen others come out of it like that."

For all Sandra knew, her method might be another form of superstition, but if it served its purpose that was the only criterion.

For a long time she sat on the side of the couch waiting for another sign from him. Finally a young woman brought her another container of ice with snow barely preserved in its midst. Sandra took a handful of the melting snow in a towel. It was common enough in Northern Gaul but had to be transported much farther in southern Italy. She was grateful that it produced the results she hoped for. The icy cold touched his

lips and Maximian seemed to smile. He told her in a voice of almost normal strength, "Your kisses are very cold."

That made her laugh. She bent over him, kissed his lips, clinging to them until she remembered that she was cutting his breath just when he needed it. With eyes still closed he found amusement at this passionate kiss and demanded, "Was that a feather? Ticklish. You can do better."

Even Enobarbus grinned at that.

By the time the lamps were being lighted several of Maximian's men had tiptoed in and wished him well. He was sleepy and failed to respond to most of these good wishes, but it seemed clear to Sandra that the worst crisis had passed. She shared Enobarbus' anxiety to find out whether he could move his arm or not, but she counseled patience for just a few hours more, and Enobarbus also had to wait.

At least when she changed Maximian's bandage in the night, the stab wound seemed to be closing and looked less formidable. The swelling was reduced and the terrible coloring of his head bruise had begun to fade.

She slept in the sybaritic room with him, drawing a couch near his and half sitting against the stiff bolsters while Max's right hand reached out in the night to be sure she was there. One of Acté's pleasant little female servants came to wait on her, bringing her broth and fish and a salad of lettuce, goat cheese, olives, and hard-cooked eggs. She ate from habit, but with many inner questions, which she discussed with Enobarbus and Max's aide, Ilarion, when they came in before dawn.

"You must return to Vespasian's forces as soon as possible. Sooner or later, Emperor Vitellius is sure to send troops to subdue southern Italy, and you won't be able to help the emperor's cause if you are executed for treason."

Ilarion, a young blond Greek of impressive loyalty, was firm in his disagreement.

"I must stay with General Max. We leave together or not at all."

But Enobarbus had other concerns, as he reminded Sandra gently. "With the civil war ending in Palestine, Vespasian's got four legions ready to ship from Syria, and as soon as the mopping-up ends, we'll have cohorts from three more. The trouble with us here is that until our legions are in Rome, there's your own future to think of. I know the general won't move until you are safe from this slavery his wife has rigged up."

She was glad she could satisfy Max's well-meaning men.

"The Lady Acté has a large acquaintance in Greece. Men and women who still adore Emperor Nero."

"True," Ilarion put in eagerly. It was clear that her presence was awkward and might interfere with the escape of Maximian and his men.

"But again," Enobarbus cut in, "you might be used badly. Max would never agree."

"You forget, I can't expect freedom until Vespasian is in control. Maybe not even then. But I am accomplished in several ways. As an amanuensis to a poet or historian. A hairdresser. Or to help dress a lady." She smiled. "Too bad I can't ask Daphne about such matters. I wonder if she will succeed in seducing Vitellius. She has Ancaris to contend with on that score."

"Neither of them will seduce him with anything but peacock's tongue or other fancy food. A female would only interest the Pig if he could eat her."

"Horrors!" She pretended to laugh. She knew the men were relieved at the ease with which she divorced her immediate future from that of General Max.

The patient recovered consciousness about midday, and though in some pain, he immediately wanted to get up.

"Let me walk around the room. Best thing for me."

It took both Enobarbus and Sandra to keep him down.

He had a roaring headache for a little while, as he admitted, but Sandra was delighted when he was able to hold out his good arm to her. With Sandra still sitting close enough so he could hold her in an embrace, he was ready to give orders. But Enobarbus had taken a well-deserved nap, and Ilarion was out on the highway at the entrance to the wealthy patrician town. He was on the lookout for any sign of Vitellius' Rhine legionaries.

Max tried to be patient, but he was not above giving orders to the handiest person in sight, who happened to be Sandra.

"*Carissima*, we'll be leaving by galley for Antioch as soon as I can walk. I've got to urge the fleet to sail at once. What I've seen in Rome shows me they need Vespasian. And what's better, they want him. Meanwhile, I know just the woman to care for you. General Titus is a very close friend of Berenice, the Judean queen."

"Yes. I know how close they are," she said ironically.

He grinned and kissed the crown at her disheveled head. "Pure gossip. Of course, it happens to be true. But you will like her. Unfortunately, Berenice has been torn by this tragic

rebellion in her country, and Titus will bring her to Rome now that Jerusalem and the other cities are on the verge of defeat."

"I have a more practical idea. I'll go to some of Acté's friends in Greece. Since Nero gave Greece freedom from taxation they've adored him, and they know Acté was his most trusted friend. I should go to Greece."

"No. They would treat you like a slave. I won't have that."

"But Acté's friends are all free. She doesn't believe in slavery. I would be safer and happier there than anywhere else at the moment."

"Not happier than with me, I hope."

Careful to avoid his heavily wrapped left shoulder, she drew closer to his body, feeling again in memory the beauty of their past sexual experience, a beauty she had thought was lost to her forever. She gave him the assurance he asked for.

"I need you. I will want to take you with me. Antioch, Caesarea, Jerusalem, wherever I'm needed after Rome is liberated. Meanwhile, I want to get on my feet." He tried to sit up, bit his lips, and fell back. Then seeing her worriedly watching him, he said, "Give me a few hours. I'll be able to lope down those cliffs to the harbor before you or Enobarbus or Ilarion himself."

Outside the window the long terrace had been built high over the blue waters of the bay. The sunlight pouring through the window embrasure was warm on Max's flesh and on Sandra's hands. The bay scarcely rippled with the refreshing breeze, although it was alive with tiny boats, most of them carrying triangular sails of bright colors.

"Nero did one thing right, in any case," she said as Max leaned his good arm on the embrasure, absorbing the beauty before them and trying to explain the different ships.

"That little felucca with the yellow sail probably carries fruits and vegetables between here and Capri or Salernum. That's not far from my villa in Pompeii. Poor old villa. Ancaris hates it. It's been deserted for months now, but it is beautiful in its way."

The villa was where Ancaris' child had been born. Sandra wondered if Max felt any natural jealousy over this, and she was careful not to bring the matter up.

"That bireme," he went on, "the double banks of oars there, will carry us to the Middle East. Don't you like sea voyages?"

"I'll have one to Greece," she reminded him, teasing but

aware that his idea of taking her all the way to the Middle East was impossible and certainly would antagonize his men.

They didn't argue about it. He obligingly pointed out another ship, much larger, with three banks of oars. It was anchored out in the bay, and several small boats and barges were still unloading onto the main deck, but the activity on the board the trireme indicated that the big ship would sail in a matter of hours.

"That should be the *Delos*, bound for Piraeus, the port of Athens. My men and I sailed from Greece in the *Delos* less than a month ago."

"I should be on that ship, not making a nuisance of myself for you and your men."

"You should be with me. Say no more about it. My first wife was a cold bitch. My second is going to love me, and no one can say you aren't a warm—"

"Bitch?"

"You know better than that." He sighed. "I wish we might have taken Domitian with us. He is so sure of himself. Always wants to prove he is braver and smarter than his brother. He thinks he can remain the friend of the Pig, like my wife. But the minute Vespasian attacks, the boy is sure to be used as a hostage."

"They won't murder him! Or the—the others?"

"Certainly not. Most unprofitable. That's not the way of it in sieges. He'll be used, like my wife, to be traded off to protect Vitellius' own family. No one knows where he has them hidden, but if we found them, our side would do the same."

Thinking of the baby Flavius, Sandra could only hope he was right. Maximian tried to shrug, groaned, and said, "I won't do that in a hurry again." After a minute or two, he remarked, "Ancaris wants to keep her properties like a greedy little harlot. And that's about the answer. We have to risk lives for her greed."

"She may be better suited than Daphne to approach Vitellius. My friend, who uses her feminine wiles, won't have much chance with a glutton for food."

"This plan on the Ostian Way would have halved our problems if we could have gotten out along with you. Well, something else will occur to us."

She knew Max was presently in no condition to perform further rescues again, soon, and was relieved that this was so. But he went on planning. "Ancaris will have to be gotten out forcibly, along with the child. I doubt if we could rescue all

three at once. Two trips, then, Or two parties. Meanwhile, we may trust to Ancaris' clever treatment of Vitellius. It will give us time. I think she told me she would do it with menus."

"Menus!" But of course that would be the perfect weapon to win over the gluttonous emperor. She almost wished Daphne knew about it. The ex-slave would need the help of important men if she was to keep living in the manner to which Otho had accustomed her.

They remained together making plans for a future involving their own love, which they made real for each other by solving all the obstacles in their way. Sometimes, the future seemed almost possible to Sandra.

Chapter Eight

In the afternoon, about the tenth hour, Ilarion returned breathless from his watch on the highway. "Excellency, a friend of our legion tells us a cohort of Vitellius' cavalry are on their way to Baiae to arrest you. Enobarbus has been dealing with the Antioch bireme. They can use the oars and slip out on the evening tide. The Lady Acté's servants will take this slave woman—"

"Lady Lysandra."

Ilarion corrected himself impatiently. "They will bring her to the *Delos*, which is sailing tomorrow. They have orders from Claudia Acté to escort this—lady to Cleophas, a rich Greek and a friend of Acté's."

"The lady goes with us. She can't be left here for the legionaries."

Sandra protested, "But General Max can't make the trip to Antioch in his present condition. He can't even walk."

"Then maybe I had better work on that little matter now." He began to get up. It was an effort. His face showed the strain, and she felt the tightening of his muscles as his fingers grasped at Ilarion's lean, tough hand. Though Sandra tried to stop him, it was useless. He wouldn't listen to her advice that he be carried to the ship. He already had his feet on the floor.

"Where are my boots?"

Ilarion approved this haste, but added, "No need to worry about your wife, excellency. My informant tells me Lady Ancaris was bosom to bosom with the Pig three nights ago at a banquet she gave for him. Old Vitellius adores her. She is to be his hostess, just as she told you."

Enobarbus had come in behind Ilarion. He gave Sandra a nod but spoke to Max. "Excellency, if the Pig has an interest in Lady Ancaris, it's possible that's another reason for getting rid of you. He can't know it was your friends who rescued

you from the eunuch. So it's got to be something personal that makes him pursue you."

Sandra watched Max, knowing he was not ready to be moved. He was under severe stress and pain but too stubborn to admit it. He had already gotten up, and now he stood erect without wavering.

Enobarbus said, "No time to lose. Can you walk down the cliffside, excellency?"

"Certainly. What do you take me for?"

But it made Sandra weak with pity and anxiety to see the effort it cost Max to walk across the room in long, slow strides, with his left arm in its sling pressed tight against his side.

Sandra gathered up cloths and unguents she had used, tied them in a napkin, then threw on her cloak.

"Ready?"

Enobarbus gently wrapped his commander in a borrowed and stained dark cape.

"Now he looks like a fisherman, if we can find a cap."

"Always thought I should have joined the navy," Max joked when Acté's tall usher came back with a sailor's woven cap that was freshly laundered, like everything in Acté's well-run household. Max couldn't get the cap on with one hand, so Enobarbus obliged and slapped it on over Max's left ear, covering the bruise on his temple. They all laughed at the sight except Sandra. He had never looked more jaunty to her, almost like a Silician pirate, but his lack of color shocked her. He must be using every bit of his reserve strength to keep that easy poise.

"On our way. The cliffside path to the docks."

Sandra protested, "It will be easier for him on the road."

"No time," Ilarion said brusquely. "The legionaries will be in the town by this time."

Before anyone could stop him, Maximian stepped through the long window embrasure onto the terrace. They all followed him, wondering how far he would get. Sandra, at least, was offering up prayers to her father's favorite god, Apollo. If he couldn't heal Max, none of the lesser gods would do.

She had to run to get beside him. He entwined her fingers in his and they started down the path under an arbor of large, blowzy roses whose first plantings had come from far-off Persia. She knew from the tightness of his clasp that every jolting step down the cliffside was a torture, but in spite of the grim set of his features, he managed a grin.

"Hope Acté doesn't mind our running out the back way."

Dangerous as it was, Ilarion urged them, "Faster, general. I thought I saw the sun shining on legion armor up there."

Sandra glanced back fearfully. But the villa was above them now and the road hidden from their view to the north of the great, sprawling wings of the building. Surely the soldiers wouldn't be looking for three sailors and their girl!

Suddenly she remembered another deadly flight, that rainy June night when Emperor Nero was led to his death.

Bad omen! She pushed it to the back of her mind. But it remained there, haunting her during the endless loping, run down to the little waterfront below.

All large vessels anchored in midstream, but the wharves were colorfully striped by the presence of little coastal vessels with bright sails, used for fishing, or local commerce, or to ferry sailors and voyagers out to the big ships at anchor. No one along the waterfront paid any attention to the four who strode among them dressed very much like average seamen and headed for the small intercoastal craft with a blue sail, now furled, and two oarsmen to take the place of sails. Near the boat with the blue sail was a longboat with six of Max's soldiers, all in casual fishermen's cheap tunics and rough cloaks.

The oarsmen of the sailing vessel waved to Max. He kept striding toward them at his rapid walk, his face grim now. No longer a possibility of a smile or joke. His left arm in its sling was pressed tighter than ever against his wound, as if he hoped by sheer pain to keep going. No one asked questions after one look at his face. Everyone held out a hand but he ignored them, and leaped down into the stern of the boat, shaking every bone in his body, no doubt, Sandra thought. He sat down a trifle more carefully, with his good hand on the tiller. He looked up.

"Some of you help the Lady Lysandra."

Sandra felt herself eased down into the boat and crouched in the stern at Max's feet, trying to remain out of the way of the soldiers about to man the oars and push off. Farther along the dock, the six soldiers rowed away from the new stone dock. Sandra looked up into Max's face fearfully. He made an effort. She thought he meant to reassure her. She raised her hands, closed them over his fingers on the tiller.

"Don't look so scared," he ordered her. "Once we're aboard, I'll sleep the night through. Fine as ever in the morning."

The men at the oars showed their inexperience, but at least they had finally managed to pull together. They kept avoiding their commander's eye, afraid to find him weakening. Sandra sensed their uneasiness, but taking her mood from Max's, she talked as if she shared this desperate optimism.

"Of course. And luckily, the sea is calm. I was once seasick sailing out of Massilia in Gaul."

"Always rough there," Enobarbus put in, to fill the void made by Max's failure to respond. It was plain that he agreed with Enobarbus' remark. He nodded, cleared his throat, and tried again.

"Looks like we've good luck. With the weather."

They were nearing the Antioch bireme, whose crew seemed to have nothing to do but stand along the larboard rail, watching the harbor. Not one of them was talking, a phenomenon in itself among these Mediterranean sailors. Sandra could see the pallid faces at several oarports and wondered why the galley slaves were not at their oars. The ship would sail shortly.

It was Maximian who startled everyone by his low-voiced warning:

"Take it around the stern, and someone run up the sail. Lysandra, pull the hood farther over your face. We're fishermen. Remember?"

It took only an instant for them all to understand. Even Sandra, remembering what Ilarion had said about the sun shining on armor, could see that behind the sailors on the Antioch bireme were legionaries in full armor, prepared for battle. She didn't need the expressions on the faces of Max's men as their oars were abruptly feathered before they changed course and started around the big ship to tell her that those legionaries on the bireme were from the Rhine and belonged to Vitellius, who called himself the new emperor of Rome.

Enobarbus muttered, "Our other lads are heading along the coast. Must've seen the Pig's men."

One of the officers of the galley bellowed down to the "sailors" in the vessel with the blue sail.

"Any soldiers, or any civilians ask to share your vessel?"

Enobarbus called up in surprise, "Not us. We saw some that walked like legionaries."

The ship's officer was pushed aside by a centurion with the insignia of the Rhine troops.

"You, there. What direction?"

Enobarbus pointed low on the peninsula to the north where the white-capped waters lapped the shore far beneath Acté's villa.

"Saw 'em there. Toward the big villas."

The centurion argued briefly with the ship's officer.

"What's your cargo?" he called down then.

"No cargo, soldier. Out for trade goods at Salernum."

Sandra pushed the big napkin of unguents and cloths toward him. "Our lunch. Squid."

Enobarbus waved the bundle at those watching on the deck high above. "Hungry, excellency? Fresh raw squid. Our lunch. But if you're hungry—?"

Several of the bireme's crew laughed. The centurion and his soldiers were revolted. The centurion waved them away.

"Get on. And get your sail working or these oars will slice you to ribbons."

Enobarbus dropped the bundle on Sandra's lap, laughing at Maximian, who grinned back, a set grimace, but it served to show he was just another sailor sharing the joke on the land-lubber soldiers who didn't include squid in their diet.

By the time the sail was up and catching the pleasant breeze the little vessel had rounded the big stern tiller of the galley and was sailing toward Neapolis Bay, with the high peak of Mount Vesuvius, an extinct volcano, wreathed in clouds on the southeastern horizon.

Maximian stirred, changed his position. Everyone looked at him. His voice was surprisingly strong.

"Someone! Look. The other craft. Are the men safe?"

"They're safe, general," Ilarion announced, after swinging around and studying the wind-rippled waters. "They saw we were challenged and headed toward the shore."

Enobarbus startled them all by laughing. He had been occupied with the doings of the cohort of legionaries on the bireme.

"They've challenged that longboat of sailors returning to the *Delos*. There'll be trouble with that outfit. They're tough. Remember our trip home on the *Delos*, general?"

"Never forget it." There were lines around his mouth, but this sudden danger seemed to have strengthened Max. His fingers rubbed Sandra's hand in a quiet message of affection.

Watching them, Ilarion praised Sandra for the first time in their acquaintance.

"That was clever, Lady Sandra. About the squid. Any

seaman knows how good it can be. But those soldiers serving across the Rhine, all they know is bread and pork."

One of the soldiers at an oar grunted. "Give me good, chewy bread and you can have all your squid and meat."

"There speaks another true legionary." Max laughed. They all heard and rejoiced without making a fuss over it. He caressed the lengthy black strands of Sandra's hair, which had been blowing in the breeze.

Ilarion avoided this embarrassing display of his commander's love life by concentrating on the breeze itself.

"Best not get too far out. We're none of us very good seamen."

"Thought I was giving the last drop of blood for the Twenty-fourth Legion," one of the oarsmen joked as he threw himself forward with the oar and then pulled back, trying to keep in rhythm with his companion on the starboard oar.

"You can both rest if that wind blows up," Ilarion suggested with a glance at Max. "What do you think?"

Max inclined his head slightly, conserving strength and concentrating on the sky.

"Carrying us in the right direction. See how that sail billows out! All right, boys. Ship your oars until we round that headland. We don't want to come in too close."

The little sailing vessel was speeding along now, riding high over the Mediterranean waves. This and the invigorating salt air inspired them all.

By the time they reached the rocky headland they were talking future plans. The men compared notes, an Antioch whorehouse versus the biggest place in Damascus, and Sandra listened with amusement, as long as Max didn't include his own experiences.

The brilliant sun, reflecting off the waters, showed them a grove of tired olive trees that hadn't borne fruit in many seasons. Dark vegetation had accumulated beneath them, casting the shoreline in deep shade. The currents came together here, and the little vessel, caught between wind and sea, shivered under the impact. Max threw all his strength into holding the tiller against the current.

At the same time Enobarbus unshipped an oar and used it to push the vessel away from an outcropping of rock that suddenly loomed in their way, Sandra forced herself to remain silent and unmoving while the larboard oarsman leaped over beside Enobarbus and pushed off with the second oar.

The vessel heeled over under this imbalance, and the oarsman, white-faced, crawled back to the starboard side.

Since the little ship had a shallow draft, they sailed over these waters without striking, but on the leeward side of the headland the sails suddenly went slack and they found themselves close in, following the shore.

Max surprised Sandra by sticking his foot out, his heavy sandal-boot nudging Enobarbus. The latter made no sound, simply looking toward the shore, where the grove had merged with a plane tree and numerous shrubs.

"Something waiting, all right," he agreed in a low voice.

"Soldiers?"

"Hard to say." Enobarbus shaded his eyes and frowned into the distance. "Archers, looks like. Can't see the uniforms. Just leather tunics. A detachment of bowmen, I'd say."

He had barely got this out when a voice shouted over the water, amplified by a naval horn: "You with the blue sail, come inshore. Show your cargo."

"Looking for smugglers," Ilarion said.

Max's two men at the oars put their backs into it, trying to get more distance between the little sailing vessel and the doubly dangerous shore.

Enobarbus called, "No cargo yet, inspector. We're out for fishing."

The officer ashore made himself visible. He was not in the uniform of the naval customs units who checked smugglers trying to evade the customs duties. He waved the horn in his hand, but he wore the legion body armor with the insignia of the new emperor's men. There would be no hope from them. They knew whom they were looking for.

"Come ashore, you, or take the consequences!"

Sandra could now see soldiers lined up in the grove above the cliff. They knelt on one knee, securing themselves for action. Their weapons were vague, but Enobarbus muttered, "Archers."

Seconds later, Max ordered his crew, "Down!"

No one needed a second warning. From the depth of the grove the air suddenly began to sing with the twang and thrum of bowstrings. Most of the arrows undershot their target, but several landed. One pierced Max's cape, and another quivered in the mast, hardly a finger's length from Ilarion's head. He crouched lower with the optimistic comment, "Lucky they weren't customs, or we'd be boarded by now."

Max had doubled over the tiller, with a grunt of pain at

the effort, but he got the tiller under control and they were now beyond the range of their attackers. Enobarbus and Max raised their heads at the same time. Max looked over his crew, then said quietly, "Manlius was hit. Get him."

Sandra raised her head in time to see a strange sight. The legionary who had been the starboard oarsman got to his feet. Enobarbus pulled at the soldier's tunic, but Manlius made hideous gurgling noises and with his comrade still tugging at him, he swayed, groped at the air, and plunged over the side into the blue depths.

Enobarbus and Sandra reached for him, grasping at bits of clothing and his hair. Max thrust the tiller into the shaking hands of Ilarion and reached far out over the water. Both his hands tugged at the wounded man, dragging him up until he was spread-eagled over the center thwart.

Sandra tried to help but could only get out of their way. Neither Enobarbus nor Max paid any attention to her efforts to help as they examined the wounded man. Sandra knew that the physical pain Max suffered during this rescue was nothing compared to his deep anguish as Enobarbus murmured, "He's gone. Must've gone the minute he was hit. Accursed arrow cut clean through his back, broke off near his heart, I'd say."

Max still worked over the watersoaked body, and Ilarion had to shake his arm to remind him of their situation. The archers were still running along the shore, probably to find a boat of some kind, but farther and farther away from the sailing vessel.

"General, we've got to get out to sea. They'll have a ship soon and we'll be done for."

Slowly, Max removed his hands from the dead man. He looked around dully. "Manlius was with me on my first command." Then, while Sandra ached to comfort him, he said abruptly, "Slip him over the side, Barbus. I'll take the tiller, Ilarion. And hurry!"

After all too brief a moment Sandra heard a heavy splash. Too shocked by this chill military change of feelings to do more than huddle in the waist of the boat, she stared fixedly at the blue sail overhead. With Max back at the tiller and the wind catching the sail the vessel moved more rapidly, skimming over the white-capped waters. She wondered if they covered the sea so much easier now because one of their comrades, the unfortunate Manlius, now lay at the bottom of the bay.

They moved before the vagrant wind among similar craft, now crossing the bay with the shore far behind them.

"We'll have to get rid of the sail," Max ordered. "Too easy to identify. Luckily, though, there is another blue sail, off there toward Capri. Let's hope they pursue that one."

Ilarion lowered the sail. They resorted to oars again, relieved when a big corn ship from Egypt, carrying the mainstay of the Roman diet, moved northward, its three banks of oars rising, feathering, dropping, pressing, with a precision that Sandra marveled at, remembering the white faces she had seen earlier at the oar ports of the Antioch bireme.

The passing of the grain carrier concealed the little vessel from shore and gave it a chance to change its course. Max ordered, "Head toward Sorrentum. We'll have to find another boat. A different sail."

Enobarbus threw his weight on the oar and then, raising his head, suggested in his usual unexcited way, "Can't do it, general. Not with you looking like that."

Everyone stared at Maximian. Sandra tried not to show any more concern than his comrades revealed, but it was like a knife thrust into her own vitals to see that the short fisherman's cape Max wore had begun to turn darker at his breast. Though the cape was rough-woven and a deep brown, there was no doubt the wet, irregular circle staining the cape was blood. Sandra moved to his side again.

"No time," Max said briskly.

She opened the napkin, got out a pad of cloth, and though he was impatient through the operation, she managed to slip the pad against the newly saturated bandage. She made it a point not to express sympathy, or in any way imply that he needed help.

The big grain ship was gone now and they rode its wake, bouncing over the bay toward the little town of Sorrentum near the headland. It was nearing sunset, and for a few minutes the brilliant orange glow on the waters blinded them. Max asked suddenly, "Are those soldiers on the dock near the little galley? Or are they marines? I can't make out any insignia. The helmets."

They all stared hard into the blaze of sunset light across the waterfront.

"Soldiers," Ilarion answered. "Where to now, general? I don't think they recognize our boat yet. Most of them are embarking in that little galley."

"To chase the blue sail. The one headed for Capri," Max put in.

Ilarion said, "Even so, there'll be others waiting. They aren't all getting in."

Enobarbus, who had been watching Maximian startled them all by his quiet insistence. "Take a larboard tack. Head for Pompeii or Stabiae. General Max has a villa in Pompeii."

Ilarion and Jairus, the other oarsman, stopped rowing abruptly. The vessel seemed to stutter as it swung around and was lifted shoreward. Even before she looked at Max, Sandra knew at once what had inspired Enobarbus' outburst.

Max's good hand remained hard on the tiller, but his usually ruddy face was colorless. He tried to grin. "You may be right, old friend." That shook them all. They weren't used to such an admission from their iron general. The pad Sandra had pressed against his bandage must have failed. The wet circle of blood on his cape was spreading. He had sense enough not to fight the only reasonable idea.

But Ilarion demanded, "What if the Lady Ancaris is at your villa?"

"She's in Rome, entertaining our glorious new Caesar," Enobarbus reminded him. "Nobody at the villa but old Bacchus, the caretaker. Lady Ancaris took the whole slave household to Rome with her."

"Hates the place," Max reminded everyone. "Nobody will look for us there. Last place in the world they'd think of. Too dangerous. That will be their reasoning. I know the minds of those northern legionaries."

Sandra devoutly hoped he was right.

Enobarbus slapped his oar. "It may give us time, anyway. Until they've stopped watching the harbor. Perfect."

With no dissenting votes they followed Max's lead and began to row for the distant shore scattered with villas, the outlying suburbs of Pompeii, the popular resort city of twenty thousand winter residents and considerably more during Rome's scorching summers.

Chapter Nine

After dusk, all but the legionary, Jairus, left the little vessel and started on the long walk through the city to the Claudian villa. It had been hoped that fleet-footed Ilarion would be able to steal a horse and cart from these rich Pompeiian houses along the shore, but too many local citizens were out in the pleasant evening and a theft might give Vitellius' men a clue to their presence. This suited Max, who insisted he could walk as well as his companions.

While Enobarbus and Sandra tried to get Max on his way, he brushed them aside impatiently and gave his last orders to the legionary remaining by the boat.

"After dark, run the vessel in at Neapolis. Too many sailing vessels there for them to notice you. Then take passage on the first galley to Antioch. Join your cohort of the Twenty-fourth Legion. And tell them what we discovered in Rome."

Jairus saluted. "I'll report the feeling of the people, and how unpopular the Pig's men are."

"Tell about the cruelty and injustice," Ilarion reminded him. "That'll put the imperator well on the sea toward Rome, and about time! He swore allegiance to Nero, Galba, and Otho. But enough is enough. He's the only man for the job."

Without looking around, Max reached out and found Sandra's shoulder. He squeezed it to indicate he knew she was there, but she understood that like his men, she was at the moment just another useful comrade. In her case, she provided a crutch to rest his tired, depleted body. He waited to wish the faithful Jairus, "The gods be with you. Tell Vespasian he is Rome's only hope. And promise him I intend to get his family—and mine," he added as an afterthought, "safely out of Vitellius' hands. Before the siege begins, I hope."

"I'll do it, general. And good luck to you. To you all."

He jumped back down into the vessel and pushed off, let-

ting the current carry him toward busy Neapolis, while the weary four who remained made their way to the Pompeian Sea Gate and into the city.

Street life stopped in all cities at darkness, except for footpads, cutthroats, and what had been called "the gilded boys," the rich young troublemakers who tossed senators in their own cloaks before robbing them, or assaulted the great ladies venturing home with their servants from a late banquet. After midnight would come all wheeled traffic, the iron cartwheels rattling and careening over the worn cobblestones as deliveries of food, household articles, and building materials were made.

The little group of three soldiers in their fishermen's garb, and accompanied by a disheveled female, looked tough enough to scare off most footpads, but by this time it was clear to all of them that General Max kept on his feet by sheer nerve.

He had allowed Sandra to secure the bandage under his tunic and they were relieved to note that the blood seemed to have been contained. As Max remarked,

"No need of our leading the Pig's men to us drop by drop."

Everyone forced a laugh, because this was obviously meant to be a joke. Having climbed a hill past the level Forum, he found the correct street in the darkness. The villa lay far beyond the big, imposing Forum, whose white temples, law basilica, and marketplace, rebuilt after earthquake damage seven years before, shone even in the dark. Though it was night, Sandra found the city charming with its wide streets, its flower-lined garden walls, and its clean, modern look. It was far different from the narrow, refuse-filled streets and the toppling tenements of Rome.

When they crossed the high steppingstones of a cross street, she noted that this town had none of the monumental beauty of Rome's great public buildings on the Capitoline Hill or in the Old Forum. There was nothing here to rival the temple of Jupiter Highest and Greatest, or the solid Imperial Hall of Records between the Temple of Jupiter and the Juno Moneta Mint. But Pompeii was a much more livable city, and Sandra thought she might have been completely happy here, married to Max. None of which seemed very likely to occur in her future.

"Must be a pretty special villa, excellency," Enobarbus said lightly, trying to keep Max concentrating on trivial conversa-

tion as he moved step after step like a military automaton. "You've even got a street named for your family."

Sandra looked around, discovered the words scrawled on the wall:

**VOTE FOR OUR NEIGHBOR,
LICINIUS CRASSUS OF CLAUDIAN
STREET, FOR MUNICIPAL COUNCIL.
HE KNOWS OUR PROBLEMS.**

She tried to copy Enobarbus' indifferent tone. "How famous your family is to have streets named for them!"

"None left but me. I'm the last."

"There's your son, excellency," Ilarion reminded him.

Max didn't answer this touchy claim. He stopped suddenly before the cement front of a forbidding two-story house with no windows opening on the street.

"Here we are."

Sandra was so relieved to think they could attend to Max's wound at last that she ignored her slight disappointment at the severe limestone facade of the villa she had pictured as charming and warm.

Max's boot slipped on the edge of a steppingstone, but he caught himself before Sandra or Ilarion could help him. He tried to raise his hand to knock on the door but couldn't make it. He leaned against the wall beside the door and complained in amused disgust, "Can't make it. You pound on the door."

Enobarbus raised his fist. Max grinned, a welcome shade of his old self.

"Hard. My friend old Bacchus is the only one at home, and he's always drunk."

While Ilarion looked back toward the cross street, watching a noisy party of drunken patricians stagger home, Sandra and Enobarbus pounded on the door. For a few minutes it looked as though they might have the unwanted aid of the drunks who bellowed up the street, "Need some help there, friend?"

But just as Ilarion was yelling, "Many thanks, no," the door opened and Enobarbus and Sandra almost fell into the

narrow vestibule that opened upon an exquisite formal atrium.

Max pulled himself together and strode in.

"Home in high secret, old Bacchus. No! Gods, no. Don't hug me. I'm one mass of sores." Yet there was a deep friendship between the two, and the old man wrung Max's right hand with great goodwill.

"I have prayed to Mars, the god of battles, to bring you home safely. But you are not safe. I must speak to the priest of Mars. He lied to me. Come, lad."

Apparently the old man, whose wine breath smelled to high Olympus, had known Max since his childhood. But it struck Sandra as funny to hear the short, grizzled old slave calling a general of the legions "lad." Even more surprising, Max obeyed him, letting himself be herded along past the shallow pool in the atrium, through the narrow tablinum where the two men dissolved into the darkness of the combined peristyle and garden beyond. It was clear that Bacchus was taking Maximian to his old bedchamber. Bacchus had no interest in the rest of his party, who had been born after Max and not in the care of Bacchus himself.

Sandra began to laugh softly. Enobarbus looked at her with sympathy, but Ilarion was impatient as always with her.

"My lady finds it humorous that General Maximian may die?"

Enobarbus started to reply in defense of her, but Sandra said quietly, "I find it amusing that we who love him are superseded by an old drunken man who knew and loved him long before we did. And I have no doubt he will cure General Maximian, so let's not remain so pessimistic as you seem to be."

Ilarion looked stiffly mortified but bowed his head in agreement and followed his departed commander in a dignified hurry.

Enobarbus said to Sandra, "Had we better go along? I don't think they will need our interference. I suspect old Bacchus knows more than we do about curing the general, even now."

She nodded. She knew how Ilarion must feel, jealous of the affection Max obviously held for the "father" he had known all his life. Sandra shared that jealousy. But she reminded herself, At least I am aware of my own feelings.

She had no idea what she would be doing in this house. Before their arrival she had pictured herself as Max's devoted

wife and lover, changing bandages, attending to his most personal needs, making herself indispensable to him. Then he would see what a wife she could make.

But everything had been taken out of her hands, and she found herself with no purpose here. She made up her mind she wasn't defeated. Ilarion had already gone striding off to locate the domestic kidnapper of his general, an act Sandra would like to have imitated. Instead, she suggested to Enobarbus, "After we've looked in on the general, we can accomplish more in the kitchen. Old Bacchus probably has great experience with wounds. Let's see if he knows what he is doing. If he does, you and I will do something about meals. When was the last time you ate?"

"So long ago I've forgotten."

They took up the only lighted lamp hanging from the stand at the entrance of the atrium and made their way through the family peristyle with its inside garden open to the sky in the center of the long rectangle. The rectangle itself was framed by an Ionic colonnade, and as in most Roman mansions, the bedchambers opened off the colonnade. A narrow flight of steps led up to the slaves' night cubicles, which were deserted now. But for Max's rescue, Sandra reflected that she would have been assigned to a cubicle very like those.

She saw the flicker of light in one of the more elaborate rooms on the ground floor and hurried through the colonnade to the doorway of Max's bedchamber. Ilarion watched anxiously, holding a basin of water for the old caretaker Bacchus, who waved it away.

"Poultice of rare bird parts will do the job. And theriaca. I'll apply theriaca. It has over fifty essences."

Max was sitting up on a narrow, elegant bed whose Greek scrollwork appeared more important than its comfort. Behind him was the usual hard bolster. It was difficult to tell whether the bleeding had stopped, the bandages were so thick and sodden, but he was conscious and held out his good hand to Sandra.

"Come and give me comfort, *carissima*. This old rascal claims it has to hurt before it gets better."

Sandra joined him, leaning over the bed and kissing his forehead. She didn't want to interfere with his treatment. There was enough prejudice from Ilarion, who, like many intolerant young officers, resented the presence of a totally unnecessary woman in their flight. She decided to wait until morning, hoping that the wound would be healing by then

and there would be no need to interfere. But she knew from the ministrations of the two Babylonian "physicians" in Baiae that essences of rare birds and the cure-all, theriaca, were worse than useless in a case where a wound should be cleansed frequently.

It was well past midnight before Max dozed off from sheer exhaustion and the effects of a cup of hot spiced wine. Sandra then discussed the situation with Enobarbus while preparing a meal for the rest of their little group in the kitchen beyond the bright-walled triclinium. This dining room had once been used for banquets, Bacchus explained, tilting the amphora and pouring himself another cupful of his master's best Setinian wine.

"Before the master was married to the Lady Ancaris he entertained here. His mother was hostess. He had his girls, like all young officers. But they came and went. His father died in Caligula's reign. His father, Appius Maximus Claudius, was a senator and refused to worship Caligula's horse as a god. So off goes a message to him to slit his wrists. Those were the bad old days."

And these are the good days? Sandra asked herself ironically, remembering the conduct of the Pig and his troops in Rome. But Max was alive, and she loved him, and one day the good Vespasian would rule. After that, all things were possible. She refused to believe the hints of others, including her own common sense, that Vespasian might be more loyal to his daughter than to his greatest general.

Aloud, she remarked, "When General Maximian was married, he and Lady Ancaris must have entertained here a great deal."

Bacchus snorted into his cup. He was echoed by a scoffing sound from Enobarbus. The caretaker said, "They wasn't together long enough. And when they were, they never saw eye to eye. The lady preferred to live in Rome. They tried to keep the same bedchamber for appearances the first year or two, but General Max was always taking duties to far places. Sometimes, Lady Ancaris went along when her father, the great Vespasian, asked her to. But . . ." He chuckled, looked knowingly at Enobarbus. "How they ever fathered that pretty black-eyed baby is something I can't figure."

"Bacchus," Enobarbus warned him. But nothing stopped the garrulous old man's tongue.

"Well, you'll admit, Lady Ancaris always did prefer weaklings. Soft, pretty Greeks and Syrians with big, black eyes."

Enobarbus reached for the caretaker's cup. "No more of that. You've babbled enough."

Bacchus immediately emptied the contents of the cup down his throat before handing it to the soldier.

As for Sandra, she had heard enough to convince her that she need not be jealous of Ancaris. This seemed a final proof, given the time of conception, that young Flavius was the child "of a weak, pretty, black-eyed Greek," her father, Perseus.

Poor Father! she thought. You never lived to see your son.

Then she concentrated on the midnight supper of sausages, duck eggs, and apples that she was preparing on the coals in the big clay oven.

Bacchus fell asleep in one corner, and Enobarbus began to sniff at the copper pan of savory food.

"You were born to be a soldier's wife, Lady Lysandra."

She said nothing to that but touched his rough hand gently as Ilarion came into the kitchen. The sight of him forced her worries to the forefront again.

"Is he still sleeping?"

"The general is resting," he informed her in a clipped voice, as he went to the oven and held out his hands to warm them. "The general has been injured before. It's common enough in our profession. We've all been injured. Difference was, we never had a pretty little slave girl caring for us." He glanced at Enobarbus, who was growing embarrassed. "I don't suppose you'd count that beauty with green eyes who cared for General Max on the Anatolian plains. Spent a little while with me, too. And how about the Egyptian whore that we all—"

"That's enough!" Enobarbus barked, startling Sandra, though Ilarion only shrugged and smiled sourly.

But Sandra felt him watching her, and it made her nervous. She had known from the first that he disliked her. It seemed logical. She probably interfered with the camaraderie among these old and dear companions.

Now there was a difference. Once or twice during that hour she caught his stare and read something quite unexpected in his face. She must be mistaken. He surely felt no attraction toward her. He had made that plain enough on any number of occasions. But she couldn't explain the warmth, a moistening of his lips and a definitely sexual invitation in his eyes as he studied her body and her every movement.

Deeply conscious of his stare, she felt more and more

uncomfortable and was relieved when the food was ready and he could turn his attention to something more rewarding, his supper.

Enobarbus praised the meal. Ilarion had nothing to say about it. He kept his attention on his plate. Sandra decided she had imagined his reaction.

Pure conceit on my part, she thought, and was angry with herself. Even though she had no interest whatever in the soldier, the idea was a reflection on her love for Maximian.

The supper seemed unusually silent. Everyone was too tired and too worried about the immediate future to talk.

Afterward, with the caretaker still drunk, Sandra found a little chamber opening off Max's room. Since he appeared to be sleeping naturally, she lay down in her clothing, and pulled the old travel cloak over her body, hoping that with the morning she would have time and opportunity to wash and clean up more thoroughly than she had been able to accomplish before preparing the kitchen meal. In Gaul and in her girlhood, piped running water hadn't been so common as it was here in Italy. But even so, the kitchen had been no place to take a bath.

She kept listening for sounds in the next room, wondering if she would hear him when his breathing became labored. He groaned several times and she hurried in to see him, but he returned to a quiet sleep, much to her relief.

She made a prayer to each of the Greek gods who might conceivably help them all and then remembered the inanimate stone and tree gods of her Gallic childhood and prayed to them also. Aside from Max's wound, she was well aware that he and his soldiers might be discovered at any minute. Judging by what she had seen in Rome the day Max rescued her and Domitian she had little hope that the three men would even live to reach the capital for trial, and she herself must end in the power of her enemy, Ancaris.

But her tired, aching body won its relief. Even her deep-rooted fears eventually dissolved in sleep.

Much later, she dreamed of ships foundering and her body being pummeled by great forces of nature. This rough treatment brought her back to full consciousness. When she opened her eyes she sat straight up, and remembering another moment, back on the Palatine in Rome when she was awakened abruptly by a stranger, she called out, "Theron?"

The man whose hand had used her so roughly seemed an-

noyed by this mention of another male name. He snapped, "Ilarion, if you please, my noble lady. The general is in a bad way. You are needed. That old drunk has most likely killed him with his treatment last night."

Chapter Ten

"No!" Although she had been roused from troubled sleep and was still hazy-minded, she understood this at once and pushed him aside, making her way quickly into Max's room. Ilarion was close behind her.

It was after sunrise, but no one had snuffed the wick floating in the oil lamp, and it gave the sickroom an eerie and depressing look. Enobarbus had been leaning over Max's bed. He straightened now. In his hands were several pads of bandages stiff with dried blood.

"Is he bleeding again?" Sandra asked, trying not to sound emotional. They had to be calm at such times, and she must set the example. There was no room for sentiment.

She examined Max's wound with all the stoicism she could muster, but it was impossible to refrain from a sharp, cutting breath when she saw the discolored flesh around the deep sword cut. It was badly swollen and exuded a sickening odor of decay, but the infection had not spread yet beyond the mere lips of the wound. Her hand shook and she had to stop and reach out to Enobarbus a second time before she could recover her poise.

"I think it must be cut away. My father received a wound across his lower arm once from a jealous . . . anyway, the physician had to cut away the rotting flesh. He said it was necessary for the evil embedded with the knife to escape from the body."

"But to cut—I don't know, Sandra. He is sure to bleed again."

"Yes. But the poison will flow with the blood."

Enobarbus hesitated. It was the usually sulky Ilarion who insisted, "Sounds reasonable, and we've no time to waste. Do it, girl!"

She backed off, revolted. "But I couldn't! It must be one of you. Who ever heard of a female cutting into living flesh?"

"I thought you said it was dead flesh," Ilarion reminded her.

"You're the proper one to do it. Barbus would likely slice off Max's entire arm. And I've no gift for it."

She had only the vaguest idea of what had been done long ago, and she shared the fear and revulsion of Max's two friends. But Max groaned and turned his head at that minute. He opened his eyes. She remembered the first time she was aware of those greenish eyes, and of his smile. He had made her think of Romans for the first time as human beings, not simply the ravishers of her world.

She looked into his eyes now.

"Dearest Max, we have to cut out the poison. It is going to hurt. Terribly. But we must make you well. Do you understand?"

His lips parted in an attempt at the smile she remembered. He murmured something inaudible.

"What did he say?"

The two soldiers looked at each other. Enobarbus spoke for both. "He said, 'Do it.'"

She walked to the door which opened onto the colonnade, cool in the morning air, while Max's comrades watched her anxiously. She inhaled the fresh, flower-scented air several times, turned around, and began to order the two men.

"We should wash the wound. And I want a clean knife. Clean! And cloths for bandages. Then bring me the unguents I had in the napkin. They're in the kitchen."

"Hot water or cold?"

"Hot for the washing. Later, we'll need cold water if his fever returns."

Her pretense of confidence and efficiency impressed them. She hoped their faith in her would inspire her own hands as she took up the sharp kitchen bone knife, which was still hot to handle, having been boiled in a kettle of water on the oven coals. At least the wound was clean now, and the cloths waiting in Enobarbus' hands proved to be spotless strips from an old cream-colored toga that had belonged to Max' martyred father.

She studied the wound. Because she dreaded what she must do, she found herself grasping the knife so tightly the pain through her fingers gave her the strength of anger. She cut deliberately, just beyond the swollen area. One of the two soldiers behind her gagged and backed away. The poisonous essence seeped out. She used one of the cloths. When it was soaked she began to cut again, around the lips of the wound.

Enobarbus whispered, "The general's out of it."

She was brisk. "Good. He won't feel the knife."

There was surprisingly little blood, but the swelling was already reduced. She gave herself no time to think, or even to be relieved at these encouraging signs.

She noted that it hadn't been necessary to cut deeply into the wound itself. Maybe they had gotten the poison in time. Maybe, by sheer luck, he would recover in spite of her butchery. She washed the area in the hollow of his shoulder, looked at the brown unguent on the side of the bed, not knowing whether her belief in it was a superstition or whether it had healing properties. Blood began to seep out over the raw edges of the wound. She took up the unguent jar. At least it might keep the cloth from clinging to the wound.

Enobarbus said, "The edges must be burned, to keep them from bleeding again. We need heated iron. Or steel. Just over the edges of the flesh you cut."

Ilarion volunteered to get the sword blade. Before she was ready for him and for this worst of all treatments, he came back. Sandra avoided looking at the blade. "Will you do it, Barbus? Or shall I?"

Enobarbus grabbed it wildly, before his courage failed him. "Lady Sandra, don't look. You've done enough. Close your ears and don't watch."

She did as he ordered, gritted her teeth when in spite of everything, she smelled burned flesh, heard Max's wild cry, then silence.

"Ready for you again, Lady Sandra."

She did everything after that mechanically. When Max's shoulder was wrapped and his arm laid in a sling to keep him from moving it and reopening the wound, Sandra allowed herself to turn to Enobarbus with the shaky question, "Do you think he is better?"

Enobarbus was still studying Max when Ilarion said impatiently, "There. I saw him move. Of course he's better. You can go along now. We all need something to eat. Fresh bread and honey. Maybe some olives, if you can locate them."

She was too tired to argue. She simply ignored him.

Carrying the stained cloths and knife on a salver, she went out and down the length of the inner garden toward the kitchen. Fortunately, Bacchus was up and about, showing no signs of the previous night's drinking. He had slapped and shaped dough into a cartwheel, scored the top, and slapped the pan onto the coals. He then showed her where to dispose

of the poisoned cloths—behind the garden wall with the sewage which floated away toward the grand cloaca.

"I don't suppose I dare venture out to the public baths?" she asked him.

"As my niece? Perfectly proper. Best wear something better than those rags, though. They're all stained." He pointed with his elbow toward a door opening off the peristyle. "Take any of the gowns in the chest across from the bed."

She started away, but he called after her, "No need going to the baths this morning, though. You can have hot water in the mistress' bedchamber."

Sandra was so nervous after her recent harrowing experience, she hardly believed anything would restore her resilience. But after a good washing and scrubbing with the aid of hot water, sponges, and some of Ancaris' perfumed unguents, she felt like a new woman.

It was difficult to find any of Ancaris' old gowns that would fit her. They were all too short and most of them too tight. Ilarion annoyed her by coming past the room and looking in as she carefully removed a house gown that was too small in every way. Standing in the plain shift which barely covered her torso, she held the dress in front of her, trying not to appear coy.

"Shouldn't you be watching General Maximian?"

He looked her over with annoying deliberation. Once again, as during last night's supper, he seemed to desire her, and yet he exuded anger. Perhaps at himself. Seeing her scowl, he swallowed hard and managed to suggest calmly, "You'll find the gowns of the general's mother will fit you better. She wouldn't have minded. She was charitable to all the general's mistresses."

She knew, or told herself she knew, that Ilarion was deliberately stressing his commander's other women. He wanted to keep her away from Max. But simply because she was a distraction, interfering with his career? Or for a slightly more selfish reason—because he himself wanted her? She would never have considered this arrogant assumption but for the way he looked at her, the way he kept looking.

Because she had considered his reasons and methods so seriously, she found herself both confident and angry. She could handle him.

"You are very kind. I'll do as you suggest. Would you please close the door?"

He actually took a step toward her, his yellow hair blowing

in the morning breeze. She was very much aware of his good looks, his hard blue eyes, and the way his mouth worked as if in anticipation. But she despised his use of his youthful appeal, for he knew well that he was trying to cheat the commander whom he professed to love and respect. And he was too cowardly to cheat when Max was his usual strong and healthy self.

She waited with the patience and the cold, marble expression of a statue. She must have shamed him out of whatever he had in mind. She could almost see his struggle, mental and emotional. Perhaps he felt she was deliberately teasing him. But her fierce will prevailed over his.

He backed away, still staring at her, and vanished into the colonnade.

She bolted the door and looked around for another chest, found it in a small adjoining room where odds and ends were stored. The gowns in the chest were old-fashioned, the waistlines higher, the oval neckline and hems of the deep sleeves trimmed with Greek designs in varied shades of the always popular red. The waists were girdled by matching cords and several heavy silver belts, which she put back carefully into one corner of the chest before she finished dressing.

Cleanliness and a new gown gave her fresh energy and, best of all, a return of optimism, so much so that when she went to Max's room and discovered he had developed a fever she was able to take the news calmly and to order Bacchus, "Find some ice. Or if any of your neighbors have brought down snow for their banquets, see if you can get some to us. Quickly!"

Bacchus had a good understanding with the head cook at a neighboring household and soon carried out his commission, explaining that the rapidly melting snow had been brought in to preserve the fresh fish from the hill streams nearby. Sandra wrapped the handful of snow and ice in a cloth and began to rub it gently over Max's forehead, then his mouth and throat.

Whether by luck or management, the fever cooled within a matter of an hour and gradually disappeared by evening. Before Sandra slept that night Max was resting quietly, and Bacchus gave it as his opinion that the master would soon be tossing down the Setinian to match Bacchus himself.

When she came to Max's bedside the next day she noted that Ilarion moved forward to the opposite side of the bed and stared at her across Max's body. She turned and motioned to Enobarbus.

"Speak to the general, dear friend. He may respond to your voice."

Enobarbus was touched and flattered at this responsibility, and he called to his general, bringing up shared memories of former campaigns while Ilarion resentfully turned away and started out muttering, "A stupid business, talking to unconscious men. I'm going to make myself useful. I want to see what the political situation is in this town."

Because it was important that none of Max's men be captured and betray him, particularly now while he was helpless, she called to Ilarion, "Take care. We need time."

"Trust me to know how to conduct myself in an enemy town."

She was glad to have him gone, but worried all the time he wandered through the resort city. If he was recognized, could he be forced to betray his commander? She mentioned this to Enobarbus, who scoffed at the idea of Ilarion's being forced to do anything under torture.

"You ought to have seen him over beyond Anatolia when Max and a few of us got him out of an Armenian prison. They were about to turn him over to their Parthian friends. Didn't bother him. He knew Max would come for him."

If she had never loved General Max before, she would have found reason for loving him now when she discovered more every day of the enormous respect and admiration in which he was held by his men. In every other word they demonstrated their dependence upon him. Even her own delight as he called for her late in the day was no greater than the rejoicing by Enobarbus and Bacchus, and by Ilarion when he returned from his spying in the town to report that several factions were definitely for Vespasian. Though, he added, they refused to move or attack the legions of the Pig until Vespasian's armies were on Italian soil and could be counted on to support them.

After that, she knew it would only be a matter of time before General Max was off to the wars, either in the attack on Rome or, if Vespasian's armies hadn't started yet, in Syria. She had no idea what would happen to her, but she knew that with Rome itself at stake, her own future was unimportant.

Thanks to Bacchus' lies, which seemed to come naturally to him, she was accepted as Bacchus' niece, come to Pompeii to make things tidy in case the Lady Ancaris should return. It was with a good deal of relief however, that she discovered one fact from the connections Ilarion had made with Pom-

peilian sympathizers of Vespasian. Ancaris remained in Rome, playing hostess to Emperor Vitellius. It was said that she provided the finest cooks in the empire, and that other women hoping to make a place in Vitellius' affections—like Daphne?—were distinctly put down by the clever manipulations of the Lady Ancaris.

All this meant only that Ancaris would not be visiting Pompeii, for which Sandra was profoundly grateful.

Meanwhile, morning after morning, there was a battle of wills, with Maximian on one side, assuring everyone after he walked around his room that he had never felt better, versus Enobarbus or Sandra, reminding him that he had almost killed himself by getting up too quickly at Baiae.

Having convinced herself that he would remain in bed at least one more night, until the battle began again in the morning, Sandra walked in the garden, able to enjoy the enchanting villa for the first time since she and the soldiers had arrived on their flight. The stars were out in splendor, and when she looked over the rear gate to study the red-tile roofs of the town, she saw the black mass of old Mt. Vesuvius in the distance. Bacchus said the extinct volcano hovered over the city, but she thought of it now as a dark guardian of the night. Like her Gallic forebears, Sandra often believed inanimate objects and bits of the earth, trees, stones, and mountains each housed its own private god.

"Dear god in the heart of Vesuvius," she prayed, "you who haven't spoken in the memory of man, help us to find happiness, Max and me."

She was startled by a hand on her shoulder. Convinced that those were Ilarion's strong fingers possessively closing around the back of her neck as Max's used to do, she said furiously, "Take your hands from me!"

The touch lightened, but wasn't removed.

"Must I? When I've been dreaming of this since that infernal eunuch stabbed me long eons ago?"

She knew Max's warm dear voice before she raised her head, rubbing her cheek against his right hand. It was only a second or two before he swung her around to his right side and his mouth was on hers, hungrily, with all the passion that must have built up in him during his abstinence. She felt herself drawn up close against his body, and in spite of her fears of giving pain to his injured left shoulder, she poured her own stored love into a return of that kiss.

"Come along, *carissima*."

She felt the throb of her heartbeat through her entire body. She had never wanted him so much. She was more stimulated when she became conscious of his own pulsebeat through his single garment, a short wool tunic. But she managed to remind herself that a short time ago he had faced death.

"You must rest tonight."

"With you."

"No. Really rest. And if you do have a good night, then tomorrow . . ." She kissed him. He wouldn't let her go for a long, delicious minute, and by that time she forgot what she was going to say.

"Tonight," he insisted.

"My darling, please . . . please think of—"

"That's all I've been thinking about. Come along. I'll make one concession. You stay on my right side."

"I don't think I should. Your friends will kill me if I cause that wound to open again."

She had nothing further to say on the matter. While her mind warned her that this might be dangerous for Max, her body, craving his love, longing for his sexual strength in her, yielded to his passionate demands with an ardor she had never known before.

When they lay lovingly beside each other, spent physically but living in memory the moments that had just passed between them, he said suddenly, "Will you tell me something if I ask you?"

"Of course. Ask me. I never loved another man. I swear it."

"No. This . . . you will probably laugh."

"Well, ask, so I may laugh."

He turned, ran the fingers of his right hand over her body, beginning with her throat, passing over the line of her clavicle and on down. She shivered pleasurably as his thumb and forefinger roused the nipples of her breasts to hardness and moved on over her ribcage to her abdomen and then the curling black hair below.

"Why is the hair on your head straight, when this—?"

She laughed softly. "You mean that was your question?"

He sat up, moved the lampstand closer, and studied her body as it shone pale gold in the glow. He asked with an abruptness that shook her mood, "Who were you thinking of when you asked me to take my hands from you? Has someone been annoying you?"

"Certainly I wasn't thinking of you, my dearest love."

After a second's hesitation, she lied smoothly, "I'm afraid I was thinking of your wife's brother. The Lord Domitian."

She didn't want anything as slight as Ilarion's temporary desire for a woman to come between the three soldiers. They would need each other desperately, if only while they made their way to Vespasian's forces.

"The accursed cub! Has he forced you? Made love to you?"

"No. But you must remember, in his eyes, I am his property. We can't blame him for the purchase made by . . . another."

"Ancaris. That bitch!"

"He listens to her in everything. I imagine he always has."

"Yes. She was a mother to him in many ways." He pounded the headboard with his good hand, his face darker than usual. "But I won't have him trying to take any of those master-and-slave rights he may think he owns over you. No matter how we get out of Pompeii, you must come with me."

She knew this was impossible, but it was no time to argue with him. When he started to make love to her again, she surrendered meekly and reminded him as she did so, "If I am anyone's slave, I am yours, my lord."

"Don't joke. Be silent. I want to kiss you at the same time, and it isn't easy, with this foul sling in my way."

Under such circumstances, it was easy enough to put off decisions until another day. But they remained, piling up higher as Max recovered.

It was Ilarion who brought Sandra the bad news, an action prefaced by an infuriating encounter. She had been avoiding him since the day he had watched her dressing, and she resented it now when he followed her through the villa one bright, crisp day, obviously hoping to catch her alone.

"What is it?" she asked finally, when he cornered her as she passed the unused triclinium. She put on her most severe expression. "Be brief."

Ilarion's contempt was plain, even in his smile.

"I'm not pursuing you, so don't act like a pure and innocent Vestal Virgin. No one who has belonged to Nero or that eunuch Helios could tempt me!"

"Good. Is that the secret you wanted to confide in me?"

"What makes the general so besotted about you? A common palace harlot who—"

Flushed with shame and anger, she slapped his cheek and

jaw, then tried to push her way past him with her palm stinging from the blow. "Bacchus expects me."

For an instant she thought he would return the slap, but his outstretched arm stopped her. Her slap seemed to act as a temptation. She saw his teeth flash like a vicious canine.

"What I wanted to say had nothing to do with you, or any other whore."

"That surprises me. Am I to forget what you called me?"

"Max can't move the fingers of his left hand."

All her anger faded before that obvious truth. She had wondered several times, seeing Max's frown and his deeply troubled air, when he thought he wasn't being observed. She had supposed he wasn't sure when he and his men could get away and join Vespasian. But it all made sense now.

She abandoned her resentment at Ilarion. This was a far more important matter.

"He hasn't had enough exercise. We should find a trigon ball, let him exercise his fingers with it. I'll get one if Bacchus knows where the games are kept." She thought Max had doubtless played trigon, a ball game for three players, when he was a boy. A simple catch game of skill.

It was as if nothing had happened between them beyond their common interest in Max's health. Ilarion nodded.

"Sounds like a good idea. But don't talk about it to him. He can't stand pity, anything like that."

"Thank you. I'd already gathered he was proud. I do know him that well, in any case."

She went to find Bacchus, whom she finally located in what appeared to be a dungeon under the kitchen. A flight of warped wooden steps led down to a cool beamed room underground, and this was Bacchus' haven. There was a wall of amphorae full of various wines, from vinegar-posca to Setinian and Falernian. Where the Setinian jars had been stored in holes cut into a wooden counter, most of the holes were empty. Bacchus' work, undoubtedly. He had simply drunk his way through that particular wine.

She found Bacchus himself squatting on the floor while he pried still another amphora from its hole on the wooden counter. He was already too drunk to be embarrassed at the discovery of his little secret.

"Have some, little mistress?"

"Little? I'm taller than you, Bacchus. But never mind that. I want to know where General Max's mother put away his

toys when he took off the childhood bulla and became a man."

Bacchus thought this over, scratching his curly gray head with one of the handles of a wine cup.

"In—room above main bedchambers. . . . Think so. You want to play with the master's toys? Odd thing for a grown-up lady."

She hurried on up to the second floor, a line of cubicles for the sleeping hours of the slave household. Coldly impersonal, they were adequate, but to Sandra, who had once lived in reasonable luxury, they were like boxes in which bodies lay before their ritual cremation.

When she reached the storage room she stood there staring at chest upon chest of family history, trying to decide where to start. She had been there in the shadowy dark of the room for a minute or two before she realized she wasn't alone. Ilarion was behind the pile of chests.

He said pleasantly enough, "So you found it too. But where is it from here on? Which of these chests? Shall we gamble?"

"There doesn't seem to be any other way."

He pulled the top chest down upon a lower one and raised the lid while he reminded Sandra, "You'd best not tell him why we're doing this."

"I know that. I'm not completely insensitive."

He glanced over her head as he took her hands, and before she could free herself, he pulled her close, saying, "If you want it that way. But I don't like secrets, especially from Max."

"*What!*" It sounded as if he had suddenly burst into an unknown language from the far Indies. Then she saw his face, realized there was something shallow and unreal about his expression. He seemed suddenly contrite and embarrassed. He released her as if her flesh burned him. He spoke to someone behind her.

"Max! What in Tartarus are you doing up here?"

"That should be obvious," Max said, too quietly, as Sandra turned to see him there watching them.

Chapter Eleven

Sandra realized she was an obvious victim of Ilarion's trick. She knew he hadn't been sincere in his pursuit of her. The whole campaign had been conducted in order to remove her from Max's life. She recovered her poise and confidence at once when she understood Ilarion's motives. With enormous self-control she managed to show only her cold contempt as she explained to Maximian, "You asked me what I meant when I said, 'Don't touch me.' It was this man."

Ilarion pushed the brass-bound chest he had moved. It fell to the floor with a heavy thud that made Sandra jump in spite of herself.

"Your mistress plays fast and loose when you are ill, excellency. Can't you see that? You heard our conversation."

In spite of the soldier's lies, Sandra was more interested in Max's injury at the moment. The arm in the sling seemed immobile; yet she thought his fingers moved slightly with his inner tension. She wondered if even the story of his paralysis had been Ilarion's lie.

"I heard you," Max assured Ilarion. His voice sounded suspiciously soft to Sandra. Not like the man she knew and loved. She made no further effort to persuade him. He would have to believe her or Ilarion. There was no way to believe both.

Ilarion said brusquely, "Good. I knew you heard enough. You're no fool, general. I just wanted to make you see the truth about her." He gestured toward Max's arm in its sling. "You can get over that in no time, once we're on our way."

Max smiled. "You interest me. I've been trying all morning to bring some life to this arm. I tried last night. So you were right about that. I am having trouble with my fingers." With his good hand he motioned Ilarion out past him and down the stairs. "We've got to make some decisions, friend Ilarion. I think Pompeii is beginning to bore you. You and your spying activities are badly needed at Misenum. You might find

out how much of the fleet is loyal to the Pig and how many men will go over to Vespasian."

Ilarion complained, "General, you need me here. I've served you well. The gods are witness to that. I can't leave you."

"Try," Max urged him coldly.

The soldier went on down the stairs as he had been ordered. He did not look back.

Torn by relief and deep sympathy, Sandra understood Max's tired look as his attention followed Ilarion to the peri-style below. She had many things to say, but she waited for him to speak. She was innocent in the matter of Ilarion's scheme to discredit her in his commander's eyes, and was determined to offer no apology. But she did want to know how Max was feeling and if there really was movement in his fingers. It would mean everything to a soldier.

Max sighed, turned away from that long, sad study of his departing friend, and smiled at Sandra. She found that its poignance gave his smile a special quality.

"He won't annoy you anymore. Shall we go down now?"

"One more minute." She suggested what she thought should be most important to him at this time.

"I think you will find you do have movement in that hand. I came up here to find some trigon balls. You can use them to regain strength in your fingers."

He brightened. He had offered her his right hand. Now he made a vigorous effort, biting his lip and putting all the force at his command into that left arm. She saw it move this time, a muscle in the lower arm, above his wrist. She pointed to it triumphantly.

"I told you so. You will be using that hand in no time."

His own joy hardly exceeded hers. He kept trying to make the muscle throb again. He failed in that but saluted her with his good arm.

"You've done it."

"I? All I did was believe you can do it."

"If I hadn't been so infernally jealous, none of these dead muscles would have been revived."

She had looked into the fallen box of linens and was reaching for the next chest when he boosted her up on top of it with the powerful strength of his right arm.

"That should have the toys. We all played ball. Try the one on top."

"It is. It is." She reached into the dusty contents of the big

box, took out hoops, balls, and dice and threw them to him. He laughed, in a much better mood, catching almost everything she threw to him in his good hand. "There. You see?" she pointed out. "Soon you will be doing that with your left hand."

Since she always had only the trigon balls in mind, she stepped down with his help. He picked up three balls in his hand and motioned her to go before him, and they started out of the room.

Sandra stepped onto the upper landing, briefly impressed by her rooftop view over these villas built on the edge of town, sprawling out toward the verdant foothills of Mount Vesuvius.

She had just started down the steps to the colonnade around the peristyle and garden below when a giant hand shook the steps. She fell against the wooden balustrade and took a tight hold on the rail, not understanding this terrifying phenomenon. The very earth below had lost its firmness!

All the gods of the underworld were busy. The gentle sway increased to a jolt. Once. Again. She cried out. Nothing like this had ever happened to her before.

"The gods! They're angry!"

Beyind her, Max had dropped the trigon balls. They bounced noisily down the stairs. He caught her right shoulder.

"Earthquake. Be calm. Don't panic."

Easily said, but difficult to do. Another jolt. No. The same one increasing. The motion had never stopped after the first gentle, rolling movement.

"Stop it! Won't it ever stop?" Wide-eyed, horrified, she stared around her, hearing a roar, like wind tearing through a forest. There was the comfort of Max's hand squeezing her shoulder, his soothing words in her ear.

"It's stopped."

She wanted to believe him, but everything around her continued to shake.

"Stay against the wall. Watch for the cornice falling. Don't get out where it can hit you. Remember."

"Everything is still cracking. Why doesn't it stop?"

"It has stopped, *carissima*. Those are just the aftershocks. All that roaring and tearing, that's just the walls and streets returning to normal."

In the colonnade she hugged the wall of the building. She

had gone all the way down the stairs and remembered nothing of that descent.

Around her she heard Enobarbus calling, "Gods in Tartarus! That was a long one. Are you all right, general? Lady Sandra?"

Max was comforting Sandra. He said without looking around, "It was only an earthquake. The one seven years ago did a good deal more damage. Half the Forum was wrecked."

"You can't convince old Bacchus this was gentler. He was in that cellar below the kitchen. Beams all loosened in the cellar roof."

Mentally, Sandra began to recover from her terror, but the aftermath remained in her body. She was still shaking as she moved away from the imagined safety of the house wall and let Max lead her through the center of the garden toward the kitchen. Bacchus came stumbling toward them.

"How much damage?" Max wanted to know.

Enobarbus put in, "All along the rear of the garden the cornice has fallen."

"S'that an earthquake?" Bacchus wanted to know. "Felt like old Vesuvius blew up."

"Lucky none of us was near this wall." Enobarbus went on examining the damage. "By the way, there's trouble in the atrium. That shallow fish pool."

The men strode the length of the garden and through the peristyle with Sandra running along between them, numb with the aftermath of the earth tremors. Her entire body still shook. Would it never stop?

In the atrium the pool had spilled over. They found golden fish, exotic rainbow-colored fish, and ugly, two-dimensional striped fish spilled out over the black-and-white mosaic tiles of the floor, which were badly split. In another minute the fish would be dead. Enobarbus and Sandra went around throwing the gasping fish back into the pool. Max continued toward the vestibule and pulled the heavy front door open. He looked out onto the noisy street, full of neighboring citizens and slaves comparing tales of the quake.

To Sandra, who was immediately behind him, he remarked with relief, "Looks as though Ilarion got away before the shake started. Just as well. He's a good soldier. We need him."

It was perfectly true, and she agreed; yet some little pinch

of jealousy annoyed her. He had ordered the lying, conniving Ilarion away, but he still cared greatly for his old comrade.

"Enobarbus, did Ilarion take anything with him?"

The soldier looked at Max, judging his mood. "I gave him three gold auriae of the money Claudia Acté lent to us."

"Good. He'll do very well."

"He told me you were sending him to bring the fleet in on the imperator's side. Or to feel them out, anyway."

Max nodded. He had been studying the street. People were still out comparing notes, with exaggerations of damages growing wilder by the minute. To Sandra's ears there was a surprising amount of laughter and joking.

One of Bacchus' neighbors had been thrown from his horse near the stables at the end of the street, and several half-clad females claimed the animal had stampeded in terror into the women's section of the public baths.

Max turned and stepped back inside the vestibule, closing the door and cutting off the hubbub of the street. For the first time Sandra took a long, comfortable breath and stopped shaking.

There was a great deal to do. Everything movable had fallen down or been shifted out of place. The small, unobtrusive iron statue of the founder of the Claudian House had crashed to the floor of the atrium, breaking the tile. Lamp-stands were down all over the house, and the floor of every room was wet with spilled oil from the swinging lamp boats. In the garden several statues around the fountain had fallen, one of them splitting the marble bench under its high awning. Not a room in the villa had escaped alteration in some way.

Bacchus and his willing band, Max, Enobarbus, and Sandra, were so busy the next few days they had little time to miss the departed Ilarion, but they heard from him indirectly on the morning Bacchus and Sandra went out to examine any damage in the city, while they shopped in the market behind the Forum.

Bacchus was greeted by a talkative wine merchant to whom he introduced Sandra as his niece.

"Greetings, girl. Bacchus said you were helping him out. Have you heard the latest?"

"Bad news or good? Price of Setinian gone up again? Gods! Where will it all end?"

"Two arms of the fleet are stationed at Misenum ready for maneuvers, and another arm is out scouting the eastern Mediterranean for pirates."

"I could've told you that. Is the Falernian by any chance cheaper than the Setinian today?"

"Higher, old man. Anyway—the wine merchant leaned over the tall amphora on the counter to confide—"it's said they need only word of you-know-who's landing for them to go over to our man."

Even Bacchus' apolitical mind reacted to this news. "Good. They'll all come around before long. All but the Rhine legions. Did the quake do much damage?"

The wine merchant made a sweeping wave of his big hand.

"Everything that wasn't anchored down like these amphorae in the counter holes. Should have seen two locals in that urinal across the street. Came rushing out with their tunics still tucked up around their waists. Funniest sight I've seen all year. It was worth the price of my broken crockery just to see them high-stepping down the street."

Sandra left the men to a few bawdy descriptions of how other citizens were caught by the quake, and she went on to buy fresh fruit and vegetables, which were plentiful and mouthwatering in their display of reds, greens, yellows, and varied shades of sunbright orange. She had discovered that the neat, beautiful Forum was probably the only section in Pompeii built on level ground. In the time when the gods roamed the earth, long before the time of man, lava had formed little hills and valleys over the land elsewhere, which gave the city variety in spite of the Roman grid pattern of the streets.

Sandra passed no ugly six-story firetraps here as in Rome. Consequently, the streets themselves seemed pleasantly light and wide. I could be happy here with Maximian, she thought. We could give our children a good place in which to grow up.

It was a city for the future, avoiding all the commercial pitfalls of mighty Rome, and she loved it as much for its beauty as for the happiness she had known with General Max during his recovery. In a week or two his arm and hand would be useful again. Already he had several times caught in the fingers of his left hand the trigon balls thrown to him by Enobarbus and Sandra.

Her feelings about this triumph were mixed. When he was able to use his hand he would have to leave her. The army came first with him. But at the same time she wondered if she would love him as much if he became weak, betrayed his duty and his cause for a single woman, even herself.

By the time she passed the guildhouse of the wool cloth-makers, the most politically influential guild in the city, she saw ahead of her a crowd of people, men and women, slaves and citizens, excited and buzzing about something. Probably still the quake damage, she thought as she walked through the milling crowd, until she heard the name of Emperor Vitellius.

"The old Pig wants to see his property, that's all."

"Who says it's his property? Just because the general's wife gives it away to save her own hide. It's been Claudian property since the early Republic. How does Vitellius claim what belongs to General Max?"

Suddenly all this gossip became intensely important to Sandra. She spoke to the fat little apple seller, who, like Sandra, had been eavesdropping on this lively gossip.

"Is the emperor coming to Pompeii?"

The apple seller rubbed his products against his red cheek and offered each of the apples to her.

"On the highway now, entering the city gates. Spent the night at a villa north of Herculaneum. Due here inside the hour, they do say. But you'd ought to know that. Aren't you Bacchus' niece?"

"I am, but we're not prepared. We knew nothing about it." The cold fingers of panic had her now. She grabbed up the apples and ran back toward Bacchus, who apparently had just heard the same news.

For once, something had sobered the cheerful old drunk. He started to babble.

"I know. I know," she cut him off quickly. "We must get Max out of the villa."

"And food. This Emperor Pig eats like a pig. What are we to do?"

"He is probably bringing his own cooks."

She was already on her way, leaping from stone to stone across the street, hurrying back to the villa. Bacchus followed her as fast as his short legs would carry him. Even so, by the time she reached the suburbs and pushed the front door open, she couldn't mistake the sounds at the lower end of the street. A procession, and undoubtedly imperial. Mounted guards clattered over the cobblestones on either side of a half-dozen litters.

The Pig certainly wasted no time claiming the property of the famous general who had failed to swear allegiance to him. Sandra was still in the vestibule when she began to call Max. As luck would have it, he had gone down with Enobar-

bus to prop up the cracked beams in Bacchus' wine cellar. Valuable minutes were wasted while she looked for the men. By the time she remembered the cellar she was desperate. It seemed to her acute imagination that she could already hear Vitellius' escort in the street outside the villa's front door.

Hearing her voice, Max and Enobarbus came up happily from the cellar. Before she could interrupt them, Max showed her that he could move all his fingers and his wrist.

"See? I've challenged Barbus to a game of trigon. I'll keep three balls going at once. You will see."

"The emperor. On his way. This villa—he's here!"

In spite of her garbled message he and Enobarbus understood the desperate situation.

"I'll have to get out by the garden gate and the cloaca. He doesn't know you, Barbus. You are safe."

"I go where you go, excellency. But you can't get far with that stiff arm."

"I'll find a place to hide. He can't stay long, with the turmoil in Rome and war liable to break out any minute."

They were already crossing the garden to the back gate with Bacchus trotting in their wake. Out of breath, he begged, "Don't leave me without my niece. They'll have me working day and night. No time for a minute to myself."

"A minute and a cup of wine?" Max asked with amused irony. "Anyway, we can't assume that no one who knows Ly-sandra is in the Pig's company."

Still puffing and panting, Bacchus left them as a sword hilt banged on the front door at the other end of the long, spacious villa.

Except that she was terrified for Max and for them all, Sandra had no firm opinion about staying. She knew she couldn't remain with Max and his soldiers indefinitely. But if anyone in the emperor's party recognized her, it would only be a matter of minutes before they connected her with General Max and the "rebellious citizens" that day on the road to Ostia. They would guess that Max was also in the vicinity.

Max had dropped back to take Sandra's arm, and Enobarbus reached the back garden wall first. Climbing over the pile of cement and tiles that had fallen from the villa roofs and the wall itself, he saw something that sent him stumbling back down over the tiles to stop Max.

"No! There's legionaries out back, from the street all the way to the sewer opening."

Sandra whispered, "They can't have found out about Max."

"It's not us they're after," Max explained, looking around, trying to decide. "They're surrounding the villa to protect the emperor while he is here."

Enobarbus agreed with a sour smile. "They don't want to keep anyone inside. They just want to keep anyone from getting in at him."

"Back into the cellar," Sandra suggested. "Nobody goes there but Bacchus."

They could hear the old caretaker in the distance. His voice fairly boomed through atrium, tablinum, and into the colonnade and garden.

"Only my niece, Caesar. Only my niece, I regret to say. But we welcome you, divine Caesar, in the name of all the household gods."

Max and Enobarbus exchanged knowing glances. They started down the steps to Bacchus' wine cellar as Max explained to Sandra, "All Bacchus' shouting was for our benefit, to let us know what to expect. You come with us."

"I can't yet. He mentioned me. But if the Lady Ancaris was with the emperor, Bacchus would have said something, warned us. I must try it, anyway. If I see anyone I recognize—Hurry! Hurry!"

Max was still hesitating when Enobarbus gave him what was probably the hardest push he'd ever gotten from a friend. He almost lost his balance but caught himself, and the two soldiers vanished into the darkness below.

Sandra drew herself together and walked slowly, with dignity, to join Bacchus in greeting his guests. She prayed madly, if silently, that none of Vitellius' retainers and escort would know her from the days she had spent on the Palatine in Rome. But if they did, her answer would be wide-eyed and innocent.

"I serve the Lady Ancaris, who owns me. Where else would I be but at the villa? To help make it presentable as a gift for the noble Vitellius."

She rehearsed this while waiting behind the flustered but adequate Bacchus. She found herself standing in the shadow of the Claudian family altars to the ghosts of Claudian dead and their ancestral gods. Forgetting her own pride as the granddaughter of great Gallic chiefs, she borrowed some of the immense pride she saw in the face of the badly chipped statue above her. It was the bust of Appius Claudius the Cen-

sor, responsible for the greatest engineering road achievement in the empire, the Appian Way.

Emperor Vitellius entered the villa, followed by weak and scattered calls of "Hail, Caesar!" from the street. In the old days of Nero's reign the cheers were always loud, enthusiastic. He had been a great favorite with the people, though despised and feared by his own patrician class. In the marketplace of Pompeii they said Vitellius was trying to encourage some of Nero's popularity with gladiatorial games and an increase of public holidays and chariot races, which made one out of every three days some kind of holiday in the Roman calendar.

Vitellius himself was a big man, and though once a powerful soldier, was now gross with the accumulations of a lifetime's bad eating habits. A joke through Rome had it that someone should put one of the sacred eagle standards of the legion on his belly; since it went before him like an aquilifer, a standard-bearer. He was not an ugly man, and of the two, might have been more handsome than the tough, businesslike Vespasian. But any looks he once had possessed were swollen with fancy living so that his little eyes were barely visible in that mound of flesh.

Having taken the empire like his predecessor Otho, through treachery and a ready ear for the flattery of his two legions, which knew nothing of Rome's real feelings, he had few friends. Probably this was one reason why he had accepted the friendship and gifts of potential enemies like Lady Ancaris and her brother Domitian.

"Besides," as he pointed out often to those few he did trust, "they can be used as hostages for the good behavior of their father and his generals. So let the Lady Ancaris keep her town house in Rome and her jewelry. When I want them, I will know where to go to get them."

He came into the villa now, leaning heavily on the shoulder of his aide, a jovial soldier with a large, purple-veined nose and a vaguely familiar look to Sandra, who couldn't place him. But at least he didn't seem to know her. She was profoundly grateful for that, and for the fact that none of those immediately clustering around the emperor looked at all familiar. Her worst fear had been that either Ancaris or Domitian would be invited on the Pig's inspection trip. But apparently he didn't trust them so far out of Rome. They might not return to their golden prison.

Bacchus was soon in his element. He faced the problem of

entertaining an emperor and fifty retainers on the food prepared for four people with the simple report to Vitellius' huge moonface itself:

"Impossible, Caesar. There's not enough food. Unless your divinity can use your power to produce it."

Vitellius regarded this statement with incredulity. "Then what am I to eat? I had my luncheon over an hour ago. I am expecting my dinner. In fact . . ." His fist gave emphasis by hammering against the already weakened bust of Appius Claudius. Sandra grabbed for it. He looked around, gave his ultimatum. "In fact, it will go hard with those who fail me. I will bathe now, get the knots out of my bones, and when I have been given my massage I'll expect my usual dinner. Am I understood?"

"Perfectly, Caesar," half a dozen voices chorused.

Vitellius said pointedly to Bacchus, "Use my name where you need it. You will find them quick enough to produce foods in the market. And see that it is prepared by the time I am ready."

Sandra showed the emperor and his closest aides to the only room she thought he might prefer. It had formerly been the exquisite silken bedchamber of Lady Ancaris. The emperor liked it. His eyes disappeared momentarily between the rolls of fat as he thanked her.

Nevertheless, knowing how very much on his mettle he appeared to be, ever conscious of slights and possible insults, she was relieved when she could turn to the prospect of putting others in their rooms. Then, among the dozen or so women who accompanied the male escort, she heard one piercing giggle that outdid all the others in gathering attention around the courtesan Daphne.

It would be impossible to avoid her, so Sandra did the next best thing. She went across the atrium to the redhead. Just as Daphne's eyes sparkled at sight of her and she started to call her onetime owner by name, Sandra kissed Daphne's plump, ringed fingers, saying loudly, "How kind of you to recall your old servant, Lady Daphne. Yes. I am Bacchus' niece, Appia. Named for this house."

Daphne joined in the fun of the masquerade at once, hugging her until the many dazzling rings she wore cut into the flesh of Sandra's bare arms.

Sandra whispered, "Have you succeeded with Vitellius, after all? You certainly have profited lately."

"Holy Venus, no! But young Lord Domitian is a divine lover. Wait till I tell you the things we do."

Sandra asked anxiously, "He didn't come today?"

"No. The emperor likes to know Vespasian's family is safe under the eye of his Praetorian Guards. I came with someone close to the emperor. A dear friend indeed. Come!" She turned, motioned, and Sandra found herself looking into the malign, smiling eyes of the eunuch Helios.

Chapter Twelve

For a terrible second or two Sandra saw her life and those of Max and Enobarbus destroyed. Helios still carried on his otherwise immaculate forehead the scar of the injury received that day on the Ostian Way, and here he was presented with an ideal vengeance. He must surely guess that where Sandra was, the injured Maximian would be nearby.

The chamberlain kept her in suspense while she watched him, hypnotized. Her courage failed her during that wait and she expected the worst, but the remnants of her pride would not let her eyes beg Helios to keep silent.

Helios relieved her only slightly when his gaze shifted from her face to the room itself and its long vista through the house to the distant garden wall.

"Now, what puzzles you, my handsome friend?" Daphne teased him. "Trying to recall where you met my servant before? She is called Appia, you know. You must remember that."

Helios' attention returned. "I assure you, Lady Daphne, I would know the beautiful Appia anywhere. I may be said to have studied her inside and out at one time." He was pleased to see her blush with humiliation at the memory he evoked, but he also puzzled her. Why was he playing this game?

He gave what she considered a logical answer, well suited to a man whose career depended on friendly relations with the man in power.

"I remember Appia and her lover were intensely loyal to the greatest soldier in the empire." As Sandra stared, he added softly, "And we all know who that is."

How clever this creature was, telling her that he was loyal to Max and Vespasian, and at the same time careful to serve Vitellius! Still, it gave her real hope that he wouldn't betray her, or set the soldiers to searching the villa for General Maximian. She forced a smile.

"You are too kind, *Lord Helios*." She was glad she remem-

bered the title he had bestowed upon himself. It would keep him in his present favorable mood.

Then she tried to excuse herself. She knew Bacchus would need her to hire some local cooks, and every minute counted. But though Helios bowed and left them, Daphne insisted on her admiration and wanted to hang onto the only friend she trusted. She whirled around, inviting compliments.

"He's truly divine, that young Domitian. And so generous. What fun we'll have when he becomes the Caesar!"

"There are several in line before him." Smiling at Daphne's exuberance, Sandra reminded her, "His father and his brother."

"Not at all. His father is past middle age, and Titus may well die in battle. Or if not, Domitian and Ancaris will work on the old man to cut Titus out of the succession. I've heard Domitian speak of this."

Startled by such frankness over an intrigue that was shocking in itself, Sandra reminded her, "He mustn't speak of his family while Vitellius is on the Palatine. He is in great danger."

Daphne waved her hands descriptively. "Lord Domitian cares more about courage than any man I ever knew. I suspect he's spying in Rome right now for his father. I know he visits the Subura slums and gives them facts about the Praetorian Guard strength on the Palatine. Then they get the news out of the city somehow. . . . Now, San—I mean, Appia—see what he's given me already?"

She had gained more weight and was obviously eating well, but no one could deny her prosperity or her full-blown beauty. Her thick waves of red hair softened her and made her youthful as always. And she retained her likeability. She wore a green silk-and-gauze dress, glorious against her bright hair. Luckily, she had worn a heavy travel cloak, because there was little enough to her gown. Like those given to Sandra on her entrance into Rome, it revealed her navel and most of her breasts, and was split up the side to her thigh.

"No, no!" Daphne cut in impatiently. "Not the gown. He did buy that for me, but it's the jewels. Look at the amethysts. They once belonged to Nero's mother. Think of it. Little Daphne, the former slave girl, wearing the jewels that used to hang around the neck of an empress of Rome. There's no knowing how high I can climb if I choose rightly. You were a fool to run away from Domitian, *carissima*. He

still talks about you, though I've pretty well gotten him off the subject. It was a little boring for a while, I can tell you."

"You are welcome to him," Sandra assured her sincerely, but felt she had to add in honesty, "However, I wish you wouldn't encourage him to take chances. This spying, this bravery—they could cost him his life. You mustn't let him do it anymore. You understand?"

Daphne dismissed the plea with the indifference it deserved.

"Really, San—Appia, the Pig is so stupid, he could never find out. He's quite hopeless. I went to him, tried everything. All he wanted to do was talk about food! Hopeless. He'll never find out anything Domitian is doing."

"Daphne, in the name of everything you care about! Remember what I say!"

Daphne waved her away. "Run along and do your duty, Appia. I'll take my bath with the emperor and the other guests. And we'll all expect a special, lovely dinner from you, dear . . . Appia."

Sandra could hardly wait to be rid of her before joining Bacchus, who had come waddling back from the kitchen looking smug.

"Are they all right?"

Bacchus brushed aside trivialities. "Bolted in on their side. Bolted on the outside as well. I have three cooks and seven slaves to attend this precious banquet. The chamberlain suggested I use them. And I am, my lady."

"I am your niece. Remember."

"Quite true, niece. Now, off to the market again."

One of the triclinium slaves and two of the cooks came as he beckoned them, and before Sandra knew what she was about, they had joined her and were walking with her to the slave gate behind the tablinum, which led to the street.

They all knew what to order in the Meat Forum and the vegetable stalls, but surprisingly enough, the name of Emperor Vitellius produced fewer results than the presence of Bacchus and Sandra.

"For the emperor? Sorry. That is to say, no fresh fish has come in since—oh, it's Old Bacchus. I'll tell you. I just happen to have a nice catch I was saving for my family's dinner. But for you . . ."

"Mushrooms not too good this week, but—well, you've got a mighty pretty niece, Bacchus. Tell you what . . ."

It hardly seemed possible, even after Sandra helped a

dozen of the emperor's slaves make ready the elegant triclinium, that they could actually have a dinner ready for Vitellius within two hours, but she didn't know the ingenuity of the imperial household. They even commandeered the dishes being prepared by nearby Pompeiian households, and in the end, they had concocted a dinner fit for a gourmet. Or in the case of Vitellius, a gourmand.

When Vitellius shuffled into the triclinium leaning on the shoulder of the purple-nosed centurion who was his aide, Bacchus was too drunk to perform as butler, leading the guests to their couches, and that duty fell to Sandra. Bacchus had, however, furnished all possible wines for the dinner before he took to drink himself. So there was no excuse for the emperor's people to approach the cellar.

By this time, Sandra was convinced that, for his own reasons, Helios would not betray her. Daphne might do anything under the influence of wine and her own volatile nature, but it would not be intentional. Yet Sandra still felt the nearness of danger whenever the emperor's sturdy aide glanced her way. She knew him from somewhere in the past and couldn't place him. There was no time she could think of when her path might have crossed that of General Vitellius' aide. It was unnerving. He clearly was trying to identify her as well. She only hoped the emperor would leave before his aide recovered his memory.

Dressed very properly for midafternoon dinner in a synthesis, the gauzy blue robe over his body tunic, the emperor automatically plumped himself down at the number one place on the number-one couch, belched, looked around the room with the cheerful blue-and-red murals, then at the semi-circles of other couches, each occupied by a supporter or sycophant. His centurion aide crowned him with fresh laurel leaves while everyone dutifully applauded. The emperor's spirits were raised even higher when he got a whiff of marvelous food courses about to appear, and he bestirred himself to express a polite gratitude for all his newly found riches.

"What a fine gesture it was of our absent hostess, my friends! To give me this splendid villa."

The centurion reminded him, "You will want to examine the place for earthquake damage, divine Caesar. That was why we came here."

"True. Very true. Now then, what has been prepared to whet my appetite for dinner?"

Trying not to show her amusement at the sight of the mon-

umental Vitellius dressed in blue gauze and laurel leaves, Sandra ordered the emperor's slaves to bring in the first course.

Daphne was lying beside Helios, obviously because he occupied a couch close to the emperor. She called Sandra to her, praised the look of the dining room, and remarked slyly, "Nobody would believe you and that drunken caretaker had repaired all these cracks and straightened all the statues and furnishings since the earthquake. We heard in Rome that it was quite a shake."

Annoyed, Sandra saw that the emperor's centurion aide had turned his head and was watching them. Above all, she didn't want to attract attention from that man, who, she felt instinctively, was an enemy of hers. It was Helios, of all people, who intervened as he delicately ate an olive.

"Lady Daphne doesn't realize that the entire neighborhood helps out in these situations. You've done well, Appia."

"Thank you, my lord."

Helios raised his eyes. "I will collect my thanks later . . . Appia."

Sandra guessed he was bargaining with her for her own freedom and the life of General Max. Looking back at him, she agreed wordlessly and then went on to see how the emperor's other guests were managing.

By the time she returned to Vitellius she could hardly believe the evidence of the empty salvers and plates. The emperor had eaten eggs, lettuce, raw oysters, olives, trout from the high hills, pork minced and served in a horrifying boar's head, two platters of creamed mushrooms, peacock meat adorned with feathers, and roast goose and sausage, and made his selection of apples, grapes, pomegranates, and figs, added to an elaborate almond pastry. All of this was washed down with numerous double-handled cups of golden Falernian wine.

Then, when Sandra and others began to hope the long meal would end, the emperor ordered several clean feathers brought in silver basins decorated with semiprecious stones. While Sandra and the others drew away from him, trying to make their revulsion imperceptible, he teased his throat with one feather after another until he began to retch. A slave hastily thrust one of the bowls under his bottom chin and he vomited his meal. With the big bowl removed, he belched, pushed his face up to be wiped and patted with perfumed water, and then addressed Sandra.

"You may begin serving again. A different menu this time, no doubt."

Sandra looked anxiously at one of the emperor's cooks, who stuck his head in at the doorway to see how successful the dishes had been. The Macedonian cook raised his eyebrows at her unspoken question, but being well acquainted with his master's appetite, he merely nodded.

Breathing more easily, Sandra replied to the emperor's demand. "A different menu, divine Caesar." She clapped her hands and an entirely new meal begun.

Conversation around the emperor became general. Few gluttons were a part of his retinue, and as he scooped and poured food into his mouth, storing it in the pouches of his cheeks, Sandra could hear Daphne's bubbling voice. It was loud enough to attract the emperor's centurion-aide, who lay with his chin in the palm of his hand and watched the curvaceous Daphne with thick, wet mouth. It was easy to read his desire for her.

Once more, Sandra found a familiarity in the centurion, in those thick lips and in the veined flesh. Sudden fear chilled her. The place of their meeting was at the back of her mind, but still shadowy. They had met in a dark place, or at night.

She started away, hoping to avoid him, but Daphne, somewhat the worse for wine, called to her persistently.

"Appia? Appia, dear hostess, you may be only a caretaker's daughter but today you've behaved very like the lady of this villa, hasn't she, Helios?"

"Very true, my lady. One might think she was the Lady Ancaris herself. Not that they are at all alike in appearance. Still, one is apt to think of them as if they had something in common."

Daphne giggled. Sandra moved to the next couch to ask if there was anything wanted, but slaves had already poured more wine, and the three couches surrounding the little mosaic table here were full of drunken, teasing would-be lovers, some of whom had managed to satisfy their craving by a change of partners on the couches. Sandra was just beginning to hope that the banquet would soon come to an end—the emperor had clapped his hands and demanded new napkins—when she heard Daphne's voice, piercingly clear:

"Don't be silly, centurion. Of course she walks like a lady. No one has a better right. I mean, Appia used to own me. You remember those days in Lutetia."

Sandra swung around frantically, wondering how she could

get out of this long room with its two doors at the north end, opening into the garden. The centurion was sure to identify her from Daphne's dropped clues. But in order to get out that door she would have to pass the couch of the emperor and the centurion of whom she was most afraid. She understood now where she had seen him before.

In Lutetia. In the great Judgment Chamber the night Maximian told her of her slavery. It was this creature, the representative of General Vitellius in Colonia, come to Lutetia to take Max's place as governor, who had first broken to the Lady Lysandra the fact that she was now the property of the empire.

She saw the centurion rise up from his lounging position. He turned and looked down the long room toward her as if seeing her for the first time in some special connotation, probably the way he had seen her in Lutetia, first in shadows. Since she couldn't escape, she tried to become a part of the scenery behind the happy, replete members of Emperor Vitellius' court.

It was useless. She could imagine what he whispered in the ear of the emperor, who grunted, picked his teeth and listened again, audibly demanding, "Eh? What's that? Where?" He had raised his huge head, jowls quivering, to stare the length of the triclinium at Sandra. "You, girl! Come here."

Too late now for second thoughts, hopes of escape. She straightened to her full height and walked back to stand before the gross, laurel-crowned slug who had made himself emperor of Rome. During her long walk of about fifteen steps, she made a solemn oath to herself that no torture conceivable would make her betray Max and Enobarbus. But she admitted to herself that she had no experience of tortures, conceivable or otherwise.

Vitellius considered her, prompted by the centurion Pollus' whispers in his ear.

"Girl, I am given to understand you are actually the daughter of a condemned and executed criminal."

She admitted unhesitatingly, "I was enslaved to pay my father's debt to the imperial treasury. I was purchased by the Lord Domitian of the Flavian House." To protect Bacchus, she added, "The Claudian caretaker adopted me in place of his dead niece, and I am helping him look after the villa."

"Yet you ran away with a soldier who had betrayed his oath to his emperor."

Max had made no oath of allegiance to the usurper Vitellius, but she wasn't in a position to argue that.

"I was captured, divine Caesar. They released me at Stabiae when they sailed for Antioch. I was near the Claudian villa. I made my way there, and the good Bacchus took me in as a member of his family. I felt that I actually remained in the service of my—masters."

Vitellius looked doubtful. "What do you make of that, Pollus? If General Max were still here, which I confess seems unlikely, my legionaries would have found him before this. Don't you think so?" He looked around, still uncertain, to receive conflicting opinions. Helios, the chamberlain, nodded. Then he glanced at Sandra as if conveying some message to her.

The centurion Pollus said violently, "I saw General Max in Lutetia with this woman. He wouldn't leave her. He was besotted with her. I say he is still here, probably recovering from the wound our friend Helios inflicted."

Vitellius belched, motioned for a slave to pat his face with a clean, moist towel, and then signaled the centurion to make a search.

"Take four of my guards, in case the traitor Maximian has companions."

Sandra knew she would do well to remain silent, but she couldn't help one more desperate protest as Vitellius waved a fat finger and a uniformed guard near the double doors came forward, taking her arm in a painful vise.

"No, Caesar! I swear he left by sea. I am the only one here with Bacchus."

But by this time she was being hustled along toward the doors. Daphne staggered up off her couch, drunk but valiant.

"The Lady Lysandra is loyal, Caesar. She gave you this splendid feast. She—"

"—may have poisoned Caesar," Helios put in surprisingly, after all his indications to Sandra of his loyalty.

The emperor nearly vomited without the aid of a feather. He looked around, his little eyes actually visible as they bulged over the fleshy layers. But several of his followers fluttered about him, pointing out that he himself still felt well, and none of them had become ill.

Sandra heard all this absurd argument and reassurance at a distance. She was being held prisoner by a huge German legionary in the colonnade while the emperor gave orders. She watched painfully as legionaries rushed past her toward

the kitchen area, followed in a more dignified way by Helios. She heard the eunuch say, "Possibly beneath the kitchen. Some sort of vegetable or wine cellar."

One of the legionaries, an Italian, stopped to point out, "Impossible. These villas are built on ancient lava flows from the days of the gods."

Helios looked at Sandra, obviously reading her fears.

"Not under this house. This is good farmland. Try it here."

His answer froze any of Sandra's slight hopes that he might have been on Max's side because he expected Vespasian to win. His conduct and his failure to report her identity must have been merely samples of his sly mental torture.

She saw one of the soldiers root out Bacchus, holding him like a terrier with a rat in his mouth. In spite of Bacchus' chattering teeth, the old caretaker managed to stammer that he knew nothing of cellars and it was not his business if Lady Ancaris left a trapdoor in the floor bolted when she went off to Rome.

About this time he caught sight of Sandra securely in the grip of the legionary and all his staunch protests were silenced. He paid no attention to Sandra's vigorous shake of the head but stumbled back into the kitchen after the men, yelling at the top of his lungs, "You can't take my niece. She's not your prisoner. What has she done? Make them let her go."

At first Sandra didn't understand his purpose, but minutes later, before the legionaries could batter open the trapdoor to the cellar stairs, Bacchus' shouting seemed all too clear. Maximian and Enobarbus had opened the door and given themselves up. They were marched out past her by two of the Rhine legionaries, but when Max slowed to give her a quick, reassuring smile, the third soldier merely urged him on and even deflected the brutal thrust of one of the other soldiers.

Sick at heart, Sandra watched Max's right wrist manacled to Enobarbus' left wrist. Then the two prisoners were marched between a double file of legionaries, and out to the street beyond.

Chapter Thirteen

Daphne, the rich freedwoman, a friend of Vitellius' very useful chamberlain, had offered to take the "prisoner" Sandra under her own wing. Vitellius made no objections, encouraged by Helios, who pointed out that Sandra would hardly run away without being assured of Max's safety. The centurion Pollus had objected, but there seemed to be a good deal of private desire mixed up in his protest, and fortunately for Sandra, he was not listened to.

All of this Daphne explained to Sandra on the first night of their journey back to Rome, but it failed to move her friend until Daphne added an explanation of her betrayal in Pompeii.

"I'm so sorry, Sandra. I didn't mean to tell that horrid centurion Pollus about you. I could've sworn I didn't give your real name. But somehow he seemed to guess."

"I know."

"You look so funny. You're quite pale, Sandra. You ought to use some of my paints. It would make you look pretty again. Don't you love traveling with the emperor? Everybody has to let him stay at their villas, and that includes all of us with him." Daphne grinned, dug her well-cushioned elbow into Sandra's side. "A good deal nicer than those places we stopped at on our last trip through Gaul. Remember?"

Sandra walked back to the tall doors, which were absurdly impressive and heavy for a country villa outside Neapolis. Nothing was in sight but the peristyle and in the distance a garden, empty in the darkness and smelling pleasantly of rain.

"I wonder where they've taken General Max. Do you think he is still safe?"

Daphne's big eyes blinked. "Of course he is safe! To most of the soldiers he is a hero. It's just those Rhine legionaries that hate him."

Sandra swung around. "That is just it. He's in their hands

now. They might murder him to keep from taking a hero into Rome."

Daphne, the incurable optimist, pointed out reasonably. "It isn't as if we were at war. Emperor Vespasian is still loyal, so why would anyone kill one of his generals?"

This was true at the moment, and Sandra had to be content with it. It didn't make her nights easier, but during the interminable time it took the emperor to make his journey back to Rome, she was able to catch glimpses of Max and Enobarbus almost every day. The prisoners were still manacled, and from their dirty, disheveled look, they must have been sleeping in the mud of the last week's heavy rains. But she was allowed to pass them while moving with Daphne's slaves, from one wagon to another on several occasions. She was rewarded by Maximian's wink one time, by the touch of his injured and recovering hand at another meeting.

At least the two prisoners hadn't been separated from the party and lodged in some prison in Rome, or worse.

"The Pig thinks he'll trade off General Max or execute him in case of war," Daphne said wisely.

Daphne was good about sending Sandra on errands which let her pass the prisoners while they were eating the rough, much-loved legion bread or simply resting on the ground. Each time, Sandra was reassured by the obvious popularity of Vespasian's favorite general and his aide. Many of the imperial soldiers squatted beside them, exchanging stories of old combat days. Only the Rhine legionaries regarded Max as their obvious enemy and treated him accordingly.

Twice, Sandra saw Maximian's face with fresh bruises, but he seemed to pay little attention to this. She tried not to let it trouble her while they were looking at each other and before she was shoved on toward Daphne's curtained traveling litter. But she dreamed about it at night and almost gave up praying to the endless gods, both Gallic and Greek, with whom she had grown up.

Sandra was torn by her desire to have this travesty of a journey end, and her fear of what would happen when they reached Rome. Daphne kept encouraging her, pointing out the comfortable position of Max's wife and her brother.

"They live on the Palatine in luxury. And they are allowed to give dinners at the Flavian mansion on the Esquiline Hill. I've been there myself as Domitian's guest. So you see, they can't hurt General Max."

"They've already hurt him. Every time I see him he looks more battered."

But all this was before the disastrous news reached Emperor Vitellius as his procession approached the grass-grown Appian Gateway where only a few guards lounged on duty. Generally, their task was to check those merchants entering to see that they paid their just tax on goods imported from other lands which might interfere with homegrown products.

The old gateway, dripping from a leaky aqueduct pipe overhead, was in sight that afternoon when legion horsemen rode out at a gallop to bring Vitellius the news. Daphne and her five slaves, including Sandra, were following close behind Vitellius, with Daphne in her litter and Sandra walking beside it, listening to her gossip. Guessing there would be trouble ahead, the emperor's legionaries crowded around. The first horseman saluted again, then announced without expression, "Cohorts of our two Rhine legions have been defeated at Cremona by insurgent troops of Imperator Vespasian. They are marching south on Rome."

Vitellius looked to his friends to straighten this confusion. "But our troops fought at Cremona, and won—some time back, wasn't it, Pollus?"

"This is another battle, general."

Already, Sandra noticed, they were referring to Vitellius by his old and well-earned title of "general," rather than the "Caesar" he had recently acquired.

"There is worse news," the horseman went on. "Cohorts of Vespasian's legions from the Danube and the Twentieth, Twenty-fourth, and Sixth of the Middle East have landed in the south to join the northern legions in a pincer movement around—"

"Rome." Vitellius snapped his fingers. "I must ride in to the city on horseback. Can't have the populace thinking I fear these traitors."

Pollus, in his legion armor, reminded him, "You have important prisoners as hostage, Caesar. Use them."

Still looking flustered, Vitellius winced. "Yes. But my own family is in the south. Well, no matter! Place our traitorous General Maximian and the centurion Enobarbus before us as we ride through the streets. If any of Vespasian's sympathizers try to rush us, they will get his own men first. Put both men on horseback but keep their hands bound."

Sandra didn't know whether to be delighted or terrified by the news and its implications for Max and herself, but she

tried to borrow some of her lover's obvious delight when she saw him brought forward with Enobarbus and both men mounted the mare and the aging stallion reluctantly lent to them by members of the imperial escort. It was impressive to watch Max swing onto the simple blanket covering of the horse with his hands tied. Sandra hoped it augured well for Max's cause that others watching were also impressed. Some applauded furtively, and a sense of uncertainty, of foreboding, gripped everyone in the party.

Vitellius, recovering some of the old vigor that had won him battles on the tough Rhine frontier, ordered his own adherents to guard the line or march to the Palatine. His men looked relieved now that he was taking hold of the situation and obeyed him with their old loyalty. Apparently, the Vespasian sympathizers guarding the Appian Gateway had been replaced already. As the procession passed through, sprinkled with water from the broken aqueduct, Vitellius received a chorus of salutes and cries of "Hail, Caesar!" which further heartened him.

Once they were riding through strangely quiet streets, devoid of the usual hurly-burly Roman pedestrian traffic, Sandra finally took her eyes off Max's straight back with its torn, blood-stained tunic and listened when the eunuch Helios had his litter brought up beside Vitellius.

"The prisoners deserve no consideration, divine Caesar. Why don't I have them taken to the Tullianum? A suitable hole for traitors."

Vitellius considered. "They are soldiers. It doesn't seem right to shut them up underground in that grave. If we must kill them, let it be done with dignity. By arrows. Not by strangling."

Sandra shuddered. The accursed Helios!

Pollus sided with the eunuch.

"No fancy Palatine apartments for a traitor. He should be left handy to the strangler's cord."

By this time they were passing what remained of Nero's Golden House, which had been half dismantled, with piles of broken masonry blocking streets throughout the heart of the city. Since it had been raining here, the streets were in even worse condition than usual and numbers of workers were out trying to repair the situation. To Sandra they looked very tough for average slaves in the employ of the government.

Streets were busier when they reached the top of the Sacred Way. This ancient street bisected the Old Forum and

ran on to the foot of the Capitoline Hill, the home of the great Temple of Jupiter. Many citizens, mostly male, stood around watching the procession. These were definitely pro-Vitellius men. As soon as the emperor's horse moved among them they began to cheer him.

Far more disturbing was the ferocious growl directed at the prisoners when the centurion Pollus separated them from the emperor's procession. Hands reached up to grab at Maximian, to pull him off his horse. But he was an old hand at controlling mobs, and he maneuvered his mount first in one direction, then another, the hooves forever threatening.

"Traitor! Hang him!"

It was the last Sandra saw of Max and Enobarbus as the processions separated, and the prisoners were herded down the Sacred Way toward the gloomy, long-unused Tullianum Prison low on the Capitoline Hill. As far as she could see, the crowds were still hounding Max. She felt that he was safe until he dismounted. After that, in front of the Tullianum's long, low, rectangular face, anything could happen.

Meanwhile, Vitellius was issuing orders as he rode.

"All gates to be closed. All entry and exit barred. If we are to be under siege they will pay bitterly for it, and so will these lice of civilians."

Daphne roused Sandra to her present troubles at the foot of the wide steps to the east portico of the palace.

"Here you are. I go on to my own house on the Quirinal. I hope you will see it someday. I adore it. Near the gardens over beyond the Capitoline." She looked around. Two huge Praetorian Guards had arrived from nowhere, and one of them caught Sandra's upper arm, whirling her up the steps.

During the long return from Pompeii, Sandra had been so well treated by Daphne she had almost forgotten that she was a prisoner. The truth of her own situation struck her now. She must face her legitimate owners, Ancaris and young Domitian. But though she might have dreaded this a few months ago, at the moment it mattered very little compared to the danger Max and Enobarbus faced in the Tullianum Prison. Would they even reach the cells alive?

The two Praetorians had their orders. She saw elegant marble-pillared passages that looked familiar once she passed inside the portico, and she remembered her flight with Domitian. All for nothing? Here she was back in a gilt prison, and this time she was doubly haunted by her last sight of Max and Enobarbus in that hostile mob.

News traveled fast. Already Domitian had been shoved out of his richly appointed rooms to join Ancaris, the ancient Zostra, and the baby Flavius in the spacious hall outside her former apartments.

"Your mistress, girl," one of the Praetorians informed Sandra. "You will be taking care of Vespasian's precious little Lady Ancaris until the emperor decides what to do with all of you. But it won't be in these fancy quarters."

Ancaris looked tousled, perhaps for the first time in her life. Regretfully, Sandra had to admit the slight golden woman appeared as beautiful now as she ever had been, though her nature wasn't improved by the pushing and shoving of her captors, who urged her along the hall. She looked Sandra over and spat with perverse satisfaction, "You are responsible for this. You were always my enemy. Setting my husband against me. Causing him to risk his life in saving you. Trying to steal the affections of my little Flavius."

"Why should I be your enemy, my lady?" Sandra asked her, always remembering how this woman had destroyed Perseus, the father of her child.

"I know why. Your precious father. A weakling. You could tell him to commit any absurdity and he would do it."

"Ancaris, take care," Domitian called out, glowering at Sandra.

"I have said nothing that isn't true," Ancaris insisted. "But a man as beautiful as Perseus, even if he was stupid, should produce beautiful children."

Sandra's attention was caught by what sounded like an admission that Perseus was the father of Ancaris' child. However, Ancaris chuckled the laughing baby under the chin. "No more beautiful than my husband's child, of course. And it was necessary to have a child, my father being the loyal, parental type! No divorce possible if I am a sweet little mother. Guard! Where are you taking us? What have we done? I demand to know."

The Praetorian grinned. "Your husband follows Emperor Vespasian. That makes him a traitor. And Vespasian's daughter and son as well. The way of the world, my lady."

Domitian stopped. One of the guards nudged him hard with a sword hilt, but Domitian managed to walk beside Sandra. He seemed to have matured since she saw him last. He was still good-looking, but there was confidence in his manner, his walk, and the proud way he held his head. Among other things, he was no coward, even in his present dangerous

position. Only his narrowed eyes and tight mouth showed symptoms of the jealousy that always consumed him.

"Was it to avoid me that you ran away with those men who snatched you off the Ostian Way?"

"Certainly not, my lord. I was a prisoner like yourself."

"Across the portico," the Praetorians ordered. One of them pushed Ancaris, then the others, down the outside steps on the northeast. For some reason they were being forced off the Palatine, down across the heavily trafficked street leading up from the Meat Forum. Were they being led to the Gemonian Steps, where "traitors" were torn apart and dragged by hooks to the Tiber?

Sandra and Ancaris looked at each other, horrified, ignoring their old enmity. Ancaris cried, "Dear Mother Juno! Not the steps! Not the terrible steps!" She stumbled, and a Praetorian lifted her to her feet, almost pulling her delicate arm from its socket. She groaned but hurried on beside Zostra and the baby. Domitian only went after being pushed shoved, and beaten with the flat of a shortsword.

The usual ruffian street mob chose this moment to shower them with rocks. Even paving stones were dug up, but luckily missed them. Sensing the terror around him, Flavius, who hadn't been hit, started to cry. Ancaris and Sandra tried to soothe him, and old Zostra jiggled him up and down in her arms, all the time muttering, "What are we doing in the streets like plebeians?"

To Sandra's left on the flank of the Capitoline Hill she saw the squat, ugly Tullianum, the prison seldom used nowadays except for crimes of sacrilegious nature or against the state. In front of the prison the crowd was still yelling, screaming obscenities, waving swords, javelins, poles, and any other weapons they could lay hands on. This sight encouraged Sandra, since it showed that the prisoners had not yet been murdered. They were "safe" inside the dreaded Tullianum.

When she first realized she must share the imprisonment of Ancaris and Domitian, Sandra would have preferred almost any other companions. But at least the children of Vespasian were no cowards. After a little while, as they were marched along, Ancaris managed to recover a sense of humor, with sly remarks aimed at the fat Vitellius or his bumbling Rhine troops who invariably made enemies of the local citizenry.

Both women took turns carrying Flavius, who was crying for his dinner. Neither mentioned the fact that there might be no food brought to them suitable for the child.

It was late afternoon now, and the front lines of the battle for the city had advanced far enough to be seen by the prisoners as they crossed the foot of the Palatine between the Old Forum and the Capitoline Hill with its great white Temple of Jupiter.

They heard a new shouting, slashing cohort of Vitellius' troops, trying to make off with all the loot they could carry as they retreated up the Capitoline Hill. The citizenry, divided, embittered, and terrified, mixed in the fray or ran like scattered insects.

The Praetorians stopped with their prisoners. They all stared at the terrible sights, relieved that the individual shrieks of pain and death were stifled by the general clash of battle. They were so busy watching they had to be ordered twice by their guards.

"You!" This to the women. "Come along. The women to the east."

Domitian objected, getting in front of the women, but was pushed back. He wrestled with the armored guard while Ancaris cried out, "Don't fight him, in the name of all the gods. Domitian! Watch yourself. Remember your destiny."

The guard laughed. "His destiny is going to be the strangler's cord, along with his friends General Max and the centurion Enobarbus. You won't be alone for long, young cockerel. And we'll have the pleasure of executing you traitors under the very eyes of your father's generals. That'll stop old Vespasian, eh, Decius?" he asked his comrade.

When the women continued to interfere, Ancaris was slapped across the face and began to sob in frustration and pain. No one in her life had ever raised his hand to her, and the shock was so great she made no effort to stop herself from being tossed up into the brawny arms of a Praetorian while Sandra, biting the hand of her captor, was dragged away, still protesting, after a hard belt across the side of the head. Amid all this panic, Zostra took Flavius after his mother lost her grip on him. The boy clapped his hands, reached for the bright breast armor of the Praetorians, and went sailing away in Zostra's arms, protesting in his own gurgling language.

The child's actions had amused the Praetorians. One of them was softened enough to call after the departing women, "It may not be so bad, ladies. At least it won't be the strangler's cord for you."

As they moved across the steps to the Sacred Way, Ancaris

looked back, her arms stretching out toward Domitian. She cried hysterically, "You will be saved! You will be what I promised you, if I have to destroy them all! Your own brother! All of them!"

It didn't make sense to Sandra, who also looked back, wondering if this was the last time she would see the irritating, oversexed yet likable youth. Would they dare to destroy Vespasian's son? And General Max? No! She couldn't bear to think of their fate if the Pig's men found their backs to the wall.

The last time she saw Domitian he was furiously battling two guards twice his size, who compounded their original faults of size by laughing at him. Sandra wondered if the fury on Domitian's face indicated anything deeper than a boy's petulant anger and fear. Did he know he might be executed, and in the most savage way? Two Praetorians dragged him up the interminable steps toward the Temple of Jupiter, where many of Vitellius' scattered followers were about to make a stand.

Other guards had taken the three women and the baby halfway up the Sacred Way when one of the soldiers, sniffing mightily, turned and looked back at the great temple.

"Fire."

Another scoffed. "You're mad. All that marble?"

"Just the same, something's burning. Might be the wooden beams. The whole temple's full of wood."

"Well, if it is burning, they won't have to worry about strangling young Domitian."

Luckily, Ancaris didn't hear this. She was complaining about her bruised cheek. But Sandra swung around in the grasp of the guard and thought she made out a puff of black smoke at the back of the temple. She saw nothing more. Several legionaries passed on their way up to the temple. For an instant she thought she recognized Maximian in uniform. Was it possible Helios had tricked everyone and brought the noisy mob to save Max? It would explain the eunuch's curious, meaningful looks at Sandra, his rapid turnabout against Max. But the soldiers' uniform bore the Rhine insignia. When she tried to call out, her captor closed his palm over her mouth. She saw only the distant group of soldiers, probably going up to take over the watch on Domitian and the other prisoners. Or were they the assassins?

It had been strange and poignant, that moment of delight

when she thought she recognized Maximian among the legionaries. Afterward, she and the other women were thrust into a closed wagon and carried somewhere, rattling over the cobblestones for a short time before they were all unloaded inside a narrow, blue-dark passageway and told to walk along a runway to some place, doubtless a prison cell that appeared to be underground. She couldn't place the stench immediately. It was a frightful odor.

At first she thought they were in some charnel pit. She heard Ancaris' despairing cry, "Oh, holy Isis, protect us!" and knew Ancaris expected them all to be murdered here and their bodies left to decay. But the stench was not the sickly-sweet odor of dead bodies. It was an animal odor. Animal dung mixed with animal blood. They must be under an amphitheater, probably the temporary wooden arena near the campus Martius. All other arenas had been destroyed in the Great Fire almost six years before.

The cell door clanged shut upon them. They were locked in, and their jailors went away without a word of explanation.

It could be worse, Sandra thought philosophically. It was Max's fate and that of poor, brave Domitian that she feared more.

Flavius scrambled down out of Zostra's arms and toddled around the cell, fascinated by the bars. He peered between them, making big ohs of astonishment and delight as he saw something at the far end of the passage.

"What is he saying?" Ancaris wanted to know, rubbing her head which ached abominably. "Zostra—you, Sandra, catch him. He may hurt himself."

Sandra followed the child but suggested at the same time, "It might be a good idea to let him enjoy himself. We don't know how long we'll be here."

"Pussy cats!" the child exclaimed, clinging to the bars and looking at what appeared to be more cells at the upper end of the runway.

"Cats?" Ancaris echoed doubtfully.

Their answer came a minute later with the fierce growl of a tiger and the answering roar of his enemies in the lion cage.

Sandra rushed to the bars, looked up the sloping runway, and saw the magnificent face of a tiger from the far Indies, huge, deadly, pacing up and down and now stopping to stare out as though his hungry eyes saw her.

The roaring and snarls began again.

Ancaris fell to her knees in panic. "Holy Isis, Juno, mother of the gods! Don't let us be sacrificed to them. Save us, Mother Juno, holy goddess!"

Sandra joined her desperate prayer, though in silence.

For hours the intermittent roaring went on. No one had fed those animals that had been destined for today's games, and the creatures forgotten grew more and more disturbed. Even Flavius got tired of watching the animals pace nervously and began to cry, adding to the confusion and terror of the new day.

There was an aperture high up in the wall of the cell, and they could tell when it was after dawn. A smoky haze filled the patch of sky they could see. They had been sitting on the damp stone floor most of the night when they too weren't pacing like the animals in the cell beyond them.

"It's a big fire, and no mistake," Zostra muttered.

Ancaris and Sandra spoke together—"The Temple of Jupiter!" "My poor brother!"—and Ancaris beat the moist walls in her impotence.

The sun completely disappeared by midday and the patch of sky was blotted out by swirls of black smoke. A door opened somewhere and booted feet rang on the stones of the passage runway, which rose toward two reinforced doors. Half a dozen soldiers of the Rhine legions tramped to a halt before the women's cell. They were led by an evil-looking, half-naked savage with a whip curled around his fist. His toothless grin looked like a live furnace to Sandra's eyes, but his whip suggested that he worked with the animals for the games. The decurion of the soldiers was military and precise, his very calm itself acting as a new horror on the women.

"Ladies, you are to be freed. Up on the ground, all of you."

Ancaris cried, "Merciful goddess!" in her relief, but Sandra saw old Zostra close her eyes momentarily and whisper some prayer of her own, in preparation for death.

Sandra managed to ask hoarsely from her dry throat, "On what ground, decurion?"

"Thinks she's clever, don't she?" the animal trainer jeered, scratching his matted chest with the coiled whip.

The decurion didn't like his job. "The arena ground overhead," he said brusquely. "Moloch, wait till I give you the signal, then let the beasts go up the ramp into the arena."

Zostrā took the shaking Ancaris to her flat bosom. "Do not be afraid, child. It will all be over before you know it."

Sandra lifted up Flavius, covering his wondering eyes with her hand. The time of their death had come.

Chapter Fourteen

Flavius, who had behaved very well, now started to complain that he was hungry. Sandra kissed his forehead, which was corrugated with his effort to understand.

"Sh! Soon, dear. Very soon," she promised, and then covered his face again. She pleaded with the nearest soldier, "Can't the child be saved? Won't one of you take him? They couldn't be so inhuman as to let little Flavius die too."

But Ancaris, supported by Zostra, did not understand. "You give away my child! Let me have him!" She fought so wildly she broke away from her body-slave's restraining arms and tore the boy from Sandra. She began to run up the stone incline.

One of the soldiers, looking shocked and ashamed, asked his decurion, "Can't we spare the boy, at least?"

"We can spare them all if the enemy troops yield the city to us, you fool! It's their choice. We've sent for Vespasian's generals, Cerealis, Atticus, and Maximian. Let them watch Vespasian's family torn to pieces before their eyes, or let them surrender."

Sandra felt suddenly full of hope. If Maximian had been freed and joined the battle, then anything was possible. The decurion added, seeing her expression, "Your precious emperor's son is penned up by the Capitoline fire. We'll have him too, before the night is over."

The little group, surrounded by Vitellius' soldiers, had just reached two great wooden doors, which the men opened with difficulty, when distant sounds of battle rolled across the arena, becoming clearer as Sandra walked out onto the sandy floor. The empty wooden tiers rose everywhere around them, but the smoke of the city fire was gone now. It had begun to rain. The women trudged across the wet sand, huddling together to protect themselves and the child from the sudden downpour.

They hadn't the least idea what to do or what was expect-

ed of them. But Ancaris too had caught her husband's name among the battle's victors who would be invited to see his family destroyed or freed. She whispered to Sandra, "Do you see him anywhere?"

Sandra frowned into the gray curtain of mist. "It is raining too hard. There are more soldiers, though, coming through the entrance. On the first tier above the retaining wall."

The wall itself was too high for a crazed animal to leap up and maul the more bloodthirsty patrons of the arena, and Sandra couldn't make out whether Maximian was one of the three men in breast armor and the white-brush helmet of a commander, but she thought she knew the leggy boy of fifteen on the first tier who led them forward to the wall. Her old friend Theron.

She told herself superstitiously that this was a good sign. These men would never let her and the baby and the others die. On the other hand, she knew that if Vespasian's generals surrendered, they themselves could expect no mercy, and no one seriously supposed that Vespasian's three legions would give up the city to save one patrician woman, two slaves, and a child, even Vespasian's grandchild.

In the distance, they could all hear the screech of wood breaking, doors being driven inward, whole tenement barricades falling nearby in the city. Then, much closer and more terrible to those women on the floor of the arena, came the roar of beasts fighting each other to get ahead as they poured up the sloping passage to the great doors of the arena dungeon. Their grinning keeper, with his whip in one hand, held a trident and net in the other like a gladiatorial net man and waited on the arena side of the closed doors for a signal from the decurion.

Something heavy flung itself at the doors. One of the tigers, Sandra thought, reducing all horror to simple fact. If the death could have come at once she thought she might be brave. But no matter how hungry the big cats might be, they would take long minutes over the kill.

Ancaris was busy sheltering Flavius from the rain, and Zostra kept looking back at the dungeon doors, which vibrated under a new assault, this time by snarling lions leaping together; so it was only Sandra who saw the three generals on the first tier, together with young Theron. Accompanying them, with one hand on his shortsword, was the centurion Pollus.

In the city there was a lull in the fighting. The arena

seemed curiously still. Sandra could hear the raindrops splashing off the mantle Ancaris held over her baby's head. In that silence Sandra recognized the voice of General Maximian speaking to Pollus, and she wondered why she could not have guessed before that the trim, controlled man between Vespasian's other generals was the man she loved.

He called out, "You have a stalemate, centurion. The minute you give orders to open those dungeon doors, our men have their own orders."

Pollus looked around, saw nothing but the empty tiers rising to the heavy evening sky, and laughed.

"Well done, general. I almost believe you. Anyone who can escape from the Tullianum with the aid of a few noisy rioters, a lad of fifteen, and a traitorous eunuch is a man to be respected. But you gave me your word you would enter this arena to talk armistice without your men and without arms. Don't tell me you lied, or that the word of General Cerealis and General Atticus is no good."

Maximian's firm voice carried surprisingly well from the first tier to the wretched, rain-soaked women on the arena below. Sandra suspected he spoke for their benefit, to give them hope.

"We gave you our word. Not the word of our best archers. Do you dare to take the chance, Pollus? This arena has many eyes. Behind every entrance, on every tier, archers are waiting."

He gestured with his left arm, slowly, as if to impress Pollus, but the gesture told Sandra that though he still had trouble with the arm, and the fingers were on the mend.

On the arena field the women's captors looked at each other. The soldier who had asked that the boy be saved now pleaded, "We've got to release them. We must be surrounded by these accursed archers he's talking about."

Another soldier supported the idea. "Look, our job is over. They've won. Why should we die for the Pig?"

But the decurion's features hardened stubbornly. He belowered up to Pollus, "Centurion, there are no archers. If they were here, we'd see them. Tell the generals the minute I raise my arm the keeper will open the gates and set his beasts upon the women and the child."

They could all see that the trainer had his hands full trying to keep the double doors closed while armed with net, trident, and whip. For the first time Sandra saw a movement on the lowest tier of the arena's east side, across from Max and the

other generals. A big, burly man moved out of the shadowy entrance tunnel into the rain. His bow was at the ready, with the first arrow set to fly. He aimed at the decurion who was giving orders on the arena floor. Even in the rain, Sandra recognized Enobarbus. Across the arena Maximian signaled to him to lower his sighting. He obeyed at once, aiming at the animal keeper.

The sight of Enobarbus made the soldiers on the ground frantic. The decurion called, "Pollus, what do we do?"

Maddened by the threat, Pollus shrieked, "Kill them!"

Everything happened at once then. The women tried to run. Maximian and his generals leaped upon Pollus, wrenching away his sword, but too late. The decurion in the arena raised his arm in a signal to the animal keeper, who fell behind the doors as the maddened beasts poured out upon the sand, six lions, dazed and herding together, toward the wall, the two tigers, a male and his ferocious mate, stalking the women.

Armed with Pollus' sword, Maximian dropped from the retaining wall to the arena sand, using all the skill he had learned through many years of scaling enemy walls. He scooped up wet sand and hurled it in the face of the loping tigress, blinding and confusing her for an instant.

Sandra ran stumbling toward the south end of the arena. She heard the ring of powerful bowstrings and looked back to see the animal keeper and the decurion stagger, the latter directly in the path of the second tiger. The keeper had been pierced instantly and fell behind the doors, but the decurion, who had yanked the arrow out of his thigh, was still struggling to run when the tiger leaped, brought him down, and squatted on him, the great paws tearing and rending. The dying man's screams were soon stifled.

The two soldiers of Vitellius who had pleaded for the lives of the victims now joined the fray, trying to herd the women back through the open doors to the safety of the dungeons. Sandra watched with her heart in her throat as she was pushed out of danger while Maximian picked up the dead keeper's trident in his good right hand, the net in his left hand, and beckoned, coaxing the tigress to him.

Enobarbus dropped his bow and followed it down into the arena. From the tiers above the two generals tried to distract the confused lions, yelling and throwing things, including their helmets, until Enobarbus was armed again. The lioness leading the pack got his arrow in her throat as she leaped.

The others backed away, growling but cowering back until they were cornered by two of Vitellius' men.

Meanwhile, Max enticed the huge tigress toward him. Just as he hefted the trident to spit the tigress, Ancaris looked back from the arena passage and screamed at the sight. Her piercing cry caused him to waver; the trident grazed the tigress and flew into the sand, where it reverberated for several seconds. Maximian waited until the last instant with the net. The tigress leaped. He hurled the net with his left arm, and the tigress fell across him, hopelessly entangled in the net.

The cheer that went up from those few who had witnessed the rescue echoed across the arena and made the helpless Polus believe the arena actually had been filled with Vespasian's archers. He surrendered on the spot to Cerealis and Atticus.

The women leaned weakly against the bars of the lions' cell, faint and shaken from their ordeal. Flavius, who hadn't uttered a sound while his life was threatened, now burst into tears, sobbing, "I'm hungry." He was the only one with an appetite.

New disturbances erupted beyond the arena walls, and soldiers of Vitellius poured into the arena dungeon along the sloping passage taken by animals for the games.

"The game is lost. The Praetorian barracks have gone over to Vespasian."

"Why not?" General Maximian asked them quietly, coming in from the arena. "They have betrayed every emperor since Caligula." He looked disheveled, his legs streaked by bloody claw marks made by the tigress in her struggle against the engulfing net, and there were the old half-healed scars of his imprisonment. But Max seemed little the worse for his ordeal.

Which was more than Sandra could say for herself and the other women. All of them were drenched to the skin. Zostra looked like an ancient crone and Ancaris like a scrawny, drowned cat, and Sandra knew she must look as bad. But she watched Max, wondering with a desperate hope whom he would come to first.

So much that was evil had happened lately, she could hardly believe it when he reached for her, pulling her to him, embracing her until she thought she would be crushed against his breast armor and the metal greaves above his wrists. His lips were whispering, "Safe now, *carissima*. Don't cry. You are safe. Soon we'll be together, my darling."

Although Zostra raised her head and reacted with smolder-

ing fury to Max's betrayal of his wife, Ancaris paid surprisingly little attention to her husband. Still consoling little Flavius with promises of food very soon, she turned to Enobarbus, who entered the sloping passage closely followed by the other two Vespasian generals and Pollus, who had surrendered to them, and their happy follower, Theron.

"Tell me where he is. Is he safe?" Ancaris demanded, grabbing at his arm in her panic. "My brother Domitian."

Enobarbus shook them all by his hearty laugh. "Your baby brother led the attack on the Praetorian barracks."

Also greatly relieved, Sandra asked Max, "Is it true? We saw the Capitoline Hill on fire. We were terrified for him."

"Safe and heroic." Max laughed and let her go, and since he himself wore no cloak, he asked Vitellius' men to lend the ladies their capes. Glad to oblige the victors, the soldiers wrapped each of the women in a military short cape while Max explained Domitian's escape.

"Your old friends Helios and the boy Theron organized a yelling mob to release us from the Tullianum. Wearing insignia of the Rhine legions, we went up to the Temple of Jupiter to rescue you and Domitian. The temple was blazing away. You were gone. Domitian told us he had heard talk of the arena as your prison. We got him out disguised in a priest's white robes, and when he heard that our men were attacking the Praetorian barracks, he went off to lead them."

Enobarbus put in, "Tell the ladies what he wore. The young lord buckled on a legion sword over his white robes, and that's how the enemy saw him. A sacred priest of Jupiter waving a sword. They must've thought he'd gone mad."

"The gods be thanked," Ancaris murmured.

Max greeted her by raising her damp, rain-soaked hand and touching it faintly with his lips. He looked at Flavius in her arm. The child stopped sniffing, looked up, and grinned at him. He would not have been human if he hadn't answered that invitation by touching the boy's black hair, so unlike his own, and shaking the small hand and wrist in manly fashion. The boy loved it.

Even though this brought Max closer emotionally to his wife, Sandra was touched and relieved that he no longer despised the child whom he refused to acknowledge. It did not help little Flavius, however, when Zostra, fooled by Max's interest in the child, urged him, hoarsely eager, "How like yourself, excellency! One would know your child anywhere."

Max turned away from Flavius with a shrug and a frown.

"I will know my own son anywhere."

He looked at Sandra as he spoke. She reddened, aware that the attention of everyone in the passage was fixed on her.

Feeling uncomfortable, and anxious to enjoy the perquisites of victory, the other generals moved on behind their prisoners, Vitellius' men, whom they treated with soldierly tolerance.

Minutes later, while Max and Enobarbus herded the women and child outside the arena and on their way to the safety of the captured Palatine, Sandra caught her first look at the city in the hands of Vespasian's men. Already, order was being restored, but she would never forget the shock of seeing Rome's greatest temple, the mighty Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, in pillared ruins, crowning the burned-out Capitoline Hill.

Max explained, both amused and exasperated.

"Vitellius' men tried to burn out the emperor's family when our men broke through the city lines. Luckily, we had Domitian out by that time. He is now considered the hero of the Capitoline Hill. That should make you happy, Ancaris."

Ancaris' old sparkle returned in some degree. "He is his father's natural heir. What does Titus know of Rome? He is forever fighting on our borders. Let him defend them for Domitian."

"We're not going to argue about that!" Max cut her off brusquely. "Emperor Vespasian isn't dying quite yet, Mars be thanked!"

But Ancaris had the last word. "Emperor Vespasian," she corrected him in triumph, and was delighted to hear the ringing shout of Vespasian's generals, in which the Pig's men were heard to join.

Sandra had lived for over two years in constant fear. Even during the glorious time with Max in Pompeii, she had awakened at dawn and gone to bed at dark with a deep dread of the future. Now, with Max's return to strength, the clear demonstration of his love for her, and the victory of Vespasian, she felt the terrible cloud lifted from her life. There must surely be happiness from this time forward, and with very human selfishness she reminded the gods that she had earned it.

She found soon enough, however, that Ancaris and Domitian still regarded her as their property and expected their fa-

ther to support them in this, despite Max's presence. More important, they lived in daily expectation of Domitian's being proclaimed his father's successor; for he was widely, if not quite truthfully, held to be the hero of the battle for Rome.

The first night the women and Flavius returned to the Palatine escorted by Max, Enobarbus, and four loyal Vespasian men, Domitian met them on the wide steps below the east portico that overlooked the city. He still wore the white priest's robe belted by his sheathed sword, the pure wool spattered with blood that was not his own.

"Have you heard, Max? My triumph at the Praetorian barracks—beautiful, they called it. They thought I was a god come down to earth, all in white with my flaming sword. 'Mars Ultor!' they yelled. About me." He laughed, his pride more palatable, still youthful. Not the way Nero had gone down, beginning to believe every sycophant.

Max understood too and slapped him hard between the shoulder blades. "Well done, young one! You certainly made them surrender, those who were able to."

Domitian winced at the slap, but gave his brother-in-law one in return, his scowl appearing and disappearing quickly when Max only grinned and suggested, "A little more muscle. And a trifle to the left."

Domitian expected to have a fuss made over him by the women, and they tried to oblige, although the horrors they had lived through in the last few days plainly showed in their faces. Even Ancaris had to make a special effort before taking her beloved young brother into her arms and whispering brokenly, "You might have been killed. They should never have let you lead that attack."

Domitian looked at Sandra over his sister's head. "It was my idea. They couldn't stop me. They came rushing into the temple to save us all just when the timbers were catching fire, but all they found was me. And I had to contribute more than that to Father's victory. How else could I be named his successor?"

Sandra had smiled at him, trying to let him see her as someone else's woman, not the sexual object he stubbornly regarded her as, but now she glanced at Max to see if Domitian's dream was to be a reality. She guessed at once, as they all went into the great, rambling palace, that Domitian had overstepped himself, thanks to Ancaris' support. There would always be his older brother Titus between the ambitious, jealous young Domitian and the imperial throne.

He caught Sandra's quick glance, and letting his sister go, nudged her aside while he reached for Sandra. She didn't like his smile, but her hand motioned Max away as he stepped forward to protect her. This was no time for the coming family quarrel over her to break out in the open.

Max ignored her gesture and was about to get between them when he was attacked with boisterous enthusiasm by a breathless Daphne and her ever-calm escort, the eunuch. They had been brought into the big, crowded audience chamber by Enobarbus to be thanked again. With his attention on Domitian and Sandra, Max congratulated Helios for the cleverness with which he had handled the escape of Max and Enobarbus, and Daphne clapped her hands as if she had superintended the entire affair.

Domitian took Sandra in his arms, his lips close to her ear as he ordered her, "Don't be so shy and stiff, my sweet slave. I told you I'd burn the memory of old Max from your body. If these accursed crowds would just leave us alone!" He caught her head in the vise of his two hands and forced his mouth hard upon hers. Caught unawares, she couldn't breathe in her panic. She heard her own guttural complaint and knew Max was interfering.

Luckily, Daphne drummed her fingers on Domitian's shoulders and he was able to save face as Max spun him away from Sandra, into Daphne's waiting arms.

Sandra took a deep breath and surreptitiously wiped her mouth. She couldn't dislike Domitian merely because he claimed to love her and had bought her, through Ancaris, as legitimately as any man might purchase another human being. But the taste of his mouth and his busy, sensual tongue were not the tastes she wanted on her lips. Max caught her gesture and was behind her seconds later.

"It won't happen again, *carissima*," he assured her quietly, with his arm locking her back against his body, his clenched fist over her breast.

Realizing how dangerous it would be for all their hopes if he antagonized Vespasian's family before the emperor arrived, she pleaded, "Please don't make trouble. The emperor will help us, as long as we don't insult his children. We can wait." She looked back at him. "We have all our lives before us."

"All the same I'm going to take you to stay with Claudia Acté until Vespasian arrives. You can help her bandage some of our boys. Her whole villa is overrun with the injured."

It was the perfect haven, because not even Ancaris dared interfere with Acté, who had done so much to help the armies of Vespasian.

But as Sandra, in her love and gratitude, touched her lips to Max's wrist, she saw Domitian's dark eyes narrowed and watching her. This little moment his slave enjoyed with General Max had not escaped him. His expression reminded Sandra of the tiger in the arena that unforgotten day, just before it sprang.

Chapter Fifteen

Young Theron had been rewarded by General Maximian with a thousand sesterces and a uniform and insignia of the Twenty-fourth Legion. Theron loved it and proudly strode around showing off his shining armor, greaves (for arms and legs), and his legion shortsword. But he preferred not to be officially inducted into the army, despite its high reputation and the pride of all who wore the uniform.

"I like politics," he explained to Sandra in his most nonchalant way. "I like hearing things in the palace and around town."

"Theron, you are an incurable spy."

He grinned. "That's true enough. Be surprised what power that gives you. For instance, they've caught the Pig. He was trying to sneak out of Rome to join his wife and children. You know what they're going to do with him?"

She said quickly, "I don't want to know."

"Something horrible. After what his men did to Vespasian's General Sabinus, who led the attack on the city—they tore Sabinus to pieces."

Sandra was relieved when the arrival of Maximian ended this gruesome conversation. He brought a chest of clothing for Sandra and set it in a litter whose bearers waited at the foot of the Palatine's wide east steps. Helping her into the litter, Max took her hand, turned it over, and brought it to his lips. He kissed the warm, slightly nervous palm. She wanted to preserve this moment forever, but there were dozens of eyes watching, and she knew this was no time to further antagonize Ancaris or Domitian.

As Max lifted her into the litter, she looked at his eyes, trying to tell him how she felt, but at the same time attempting to caution him. He seemed to understand her, and if he held her in his arms longer than necessary, they knew it was the last time until the arrival of Emperor—soon to be Emperor—Vespasian.

She kept the curtains of the litter closed as the bearers carried her across the city to the Appian Gateway. Max rode beside the litter, on a black stallion that needed all his control in the still-unsettled but rejoicing city.

Suddenly, the litter bearers stopped, badly shaking up Sandra. By the time she got the curtains opened the bearers had set down the poles and were fighting among themselves to get a good view of some violence in the street ahead of them. Max rode in front of her, the stallion's hooves and its fiery nostrils easily forcing a way to the center of the crowd, where movement became impossible. Sandra rose up on her knees, wondering. She heard Max's sharp command.

"Release him. He is an imperial prisoner. That is an order. I speak for the emperor."

Several in the mob argued with him. At first he seemed to be the only man in uniform. No. There was another. The gross, pitiful figure of Emperor Vitellius was being pushed and prodded along at the end of swords and javelins, with a noose looped around his huge, fleshy neck.

None of the soldiers prodding him as he stumbled bore the insignia of the eastern legions. It wouldn't have surprised Sandra to find that these vengeful soldiers had been in the Pig's own legions. Encouraged by the mob, one of the soldiers threw the end of the rope over the jutting beams of a burned-out tenement.

Max called out again, but the mob surrounded him. He was still struggling against a half-dozen men when the rope was pulled taut from the beam. Sandra screamed, closing her eyes, but not quickly enough to blot out the sight of the bloated body swung up into the air, madly struggling, like a great bull for the slaughter. The sounds went on for an eternity of seconds. Even the mob's bloodthirsty cries did not drown out the hideous noises made by the strangling man, or the guffaws of the audience.

Max didn't return to the litter until he had given orders for the disposal of the emperor's body on a decent Roman pyre. When he came back to Sandra she was still shaking.

"I know, *carissima*. It was brutal and crude. But he allowed even worse to happen to our own General Sabinus. Try not to think of it, darling."

She watched him as he mounted the skittish stallion with ease. He ordered, "Bearers, get on."

Infected by Sandra's own fear, they took up the poles and trotted on, with Max riding beside her. Sandra made a strong

effort and managed to smile at him from time to time, but she felt drained and beaten by the sight and sound of the Roman mob at work. She had understood in the murder of Vitellius that though Max might prefer a trial and execution for the Pig, basically he approved of the man's death. The realization shook her. It would take time for the memory of the squirming, fat, desperate old man to fade. And she would never forget the jeering mockery of the mob.

Claudia Acté came out onto the pebble-strewn ground to receive them. In her quiet way she was delighted to see Sandra and immediately set her to work wrapping the wounds of several old Vespasian veterans lying on their pallets in the atrium of her villa. Acté asked Max about the situation inside Rome and rejoiced with him that "everything had been conducted as fairly as possible, and order was now restored to the city." Acté added, "For the first time since Emperor Nero died."

Hearing their discussion, Sandra said nothing. She wondered how they could consider the hanging of Vitellius an orderly event.

All the same, when Max came in to kiss her goodbye until he could make a longer stay at the villa, she clung to him, her doubts forgotten.

"Take care of yourself. Promise me."

He was kissing her and couldn't answer until he had done the job properly. Several of the injured men watched them but didn't resent the fact that their general took possession of a woman who had begun to ease their discomfort. One of the rugged old-time legionaries even joked, "See, General Max? When I fought beside you in Anatolia, I lost a slice out of my right leg. Now I'm balanced again. Lost a chunk of my left arm taking Rome back from the Pig. We settled his sausage, didn't we, general?"

"That we did, Philodemus." Max kissed Sandra once more, like a brief promise for the future, and then leaned over, closing his fingers on the soldier's right hand and wrist.

The soldier was flattered and at once pointed out to the other injured men, "You see? What'd I tell you? He knows our names. Even the least of us. General Max is like that."

Max pretended gruffness, but Sandra could see he had been tremendously pleased.

"See that you heal that arm in a hurry. We still need you on the Parthian front. But we'll treat you royally first."

"Count on me, excellence. And these lads here."

All the others chimed in eagerly.

Sandra got back to work, this time wrapping a bandage around the temple of a young soldier with a head wound. She knew if the bad gouge made by an arrow did not stop bleeding, the next step was to cauterize it with fire and sword, so she worked doubly hard, and tried not to be distracted from her task when Max left the villa.

Soon after the Saturnalia holidays, which were celebrated as a fitting return to normal following two years of turmoil, the Senate came out of hiding. Husbands, wives, and families crowded into the city, which, unfortunately for this great debating body, had just proved they were not needed. The sacred SPQR proclaimed to the world that the empire was ruled by the Senate in conjunction with the Roman people, but the people had chosen its leader, and the Senate could only endorse the people's favorite.

They did so in haste, and went on to vote Emperor Vespasian Consul of the Year, to share this enormous power with his elder son, Titus. Both generals were too busy cleaning up remnants of the rebellion in Judea and the depredations of the Parthians in eastern Syria, and did not return to Rome until they could bring reports of victory. But through their subordinates, Maximian, Cerealis, and Atticus, the government of the dangerous, volatile city of Rome was handled with efficiency and moderation.

When it looked as though the unemployed mobs would continue to make trouble, Maximian put them to work rebuilding the sacred Temple of Jupiter. General Max was so busy Sandra saw him less than she had hoped, but the results of his work were seen everywhere, and she was delighted at the reputation he had built through his endless hours of dedication.

She knew from Daphne's chatter that Max paid no attention to any other female in Rome, including his wife, and to the scandal of the senatorial wives, he did not even appear as host when Ancaris gave banquets at their home on the Caelian Hill in the city. He made love to Sandra when he visited her at Acté's villa, but it was always clear to Sandra that no matter how much he needed her, his administrative work and his field campaigns were uppermost in his mind. His greatest joy was in discussing his plans with her.

She wanted to come first in his thoughts, but she was sensible enough to know that his very dedication made his love more precious to her. She had fallen in love with him as he

was. If she wanted a man who placed romance above everything, she would not have loved him in the first place. Her father had been the exact opposite of this dedicated officer, and though she pitied Perseus, she despised him too.

Their personal relations were kept as private as possible. Acté's servants would as soon be crucified as betray her or anyone in her care. But there were times when Sandra and Max lay in bed together discussing the future of the Roman State under Vespasian when she smiled to herself, reflecting how surprised Domitian and Ancaris might be if they knew that such talks were among the greatest pleasures she shared with the general.

Domitian came out to Acté's villa frequently, as if hoping to catch the lovers unawares, but Sandra had arranged to have servants present whenever the dashing young "conqueror of the Praetorians" appeared. She had tried to talk him out of the black fury into which he fell when the Senate honored his father and older brother as the twin consuls—"Everybody knows I conquered Rome for my father. I should have shared the consulship."

As the weeks rolled by he came to believe more and more that he himself had conducted the entire conquest of the city. And he was aided in this by all the eager, fawning sycophants around him. By the time his father and brother had stamped out the last embers of the rebellions against the Jewish King Agrippa and his beautiful sister, Queen Berenice, and were returning in triumph to Rome, Ancaris had convinced Domitian that he was being robbed of his rightful place as consul beside the emperor, his father.

"It was all the fault of the accursed Senate. They appointed Titus as co-consul with Father instead of me. But Father himself would rather have me beside him," Domitian insisted. "Since he is going to choose me to follow him as the next emperor."

"I don't understand. Who told you that you were to be the next emperor, my lord?"

Domitian was impatient with her density. "Ancaris, of course. She has all the weight with Father. She says he must choose me because I know Rome so much better than Titus does. And besides, Titus is having that disgraceful affair with Queen Berenice. Rome would never stand for that. Look at how they treated Cleopatra. They don't want any Asiatic queens. . . . But who wants to talk politics in the company of beautiful women? Why don't we find that dark bedcham-

ber you shared with Max that time, and I'll make you forget old Max in a hurry?"

Thanks to Acté's contriving, one of her women remained within sight of Domitian and Sandra, and he had to give up, but not without one of his dark, ominous warnings:

"But I'll have you if I die for it, Sandra. Someday you will lie with me. You have my sacred word on that!"

She had no doubt he believed it, and could only protect herself by seeing that she was never entirely alone with him. According to Sandra's next visitor, Daphne, the young man made up for his abstinence with Sandra by what he did at home on the Palatine. She described in detail some interesting sexual maneuvers that Domitian indulged in at the private baths in the palace.

"And Sandra, they do say the great Vespasian has already landed at Misenum, where the fleet is stationed. There is going to be a triumphal procession. Of course"—she wrinkled her small nose—"that horrid Titus will share the triumph. Just because he won a stupid war."

"What makes you say Titus is horrid? You've never met him, have you?"

"No. But Domitian says—"

"He has brought victory in Judea, and all the usual trophies of conquest."

"And a Jewish mistress. Really, Sandra! Aren't we Romans good enough for him?"

This was a moot point, since neither Daphne nor Sandra was Roman. But Daphne's long tenure on the Palatine had made her more chauvinistic than the purest-blooded patrician woman.

On a crisp, golden day in the late autumn, Emperor Vespasian with his son and co-consul, General Titus, entered Rome by the Appian Way of Triumph. All the city and most of the countryside turned out, either in devotion or curiosity to see the much-admired emperor, and to watch the show being put on for their benefit.

Max, who was in the procession with Domitian and three other triumphant generals, had arranged for Sandra and Claudia Acté to watch from the balcony of a patrician house on the broad highway. The procession would reach its climax at the temples on the Sacred Way, below the great Palatine steps.

Sandra had learned in a bitter school not to trust in the goodness of conquerors, and was unusually nervous as she

watched for the first sight of the procession. Acté remained her calm self reminding her, "Even if Vespasian refused to let General Max divorce his daughter, he is sure to grant Max any other favor. It is a point of honor. He knows what he owes to Max. And Max will ask for your freedom."

"Yes," Sandra agreed absently, but she had a premonition that it would not be easy, persuading the emperor to act against his own daughter's best interests.

They could hear the procession before they saw it: the brassy sound of the bucinas, and through that, the drums, the trumpets, the steady cadence of boots. Sandra paid little attention to the musicians marching ahead, nor to Vespasian's battle-hardened legionaries and their standard-bearers, or the proud aquilifers, carrying the eagle of each legion. She leaned far out over the stone balustrade and made out the figure of General Maximian controlling his black stallion and riding in company with dark young Domitian. The two rode immediately behind the chariots of Emperor Vespasian and General Titus.

Having satisfied herself that Max was certainly the handsomest general in the procession, Sandra gave her attention to the emperor. It would be hard to find anyone who looked less like the Caesars of recent memory. There was nothing effete about him, nor gluttonous, nor elegant in any sense. He had no intellectual pretensions, but he did not look stupid. In the years since she had seen him fall asleep during Nero's last Greek concert, he had changed very little. An intelligent, hardworking soldier, stern but just, and with a quirk about his mouth that made her suspect he might have a dry sense of humor. He was no lightweight, but solidly built without running to fat.

Right now, conforming to tradition, he rode in a gilded, heavily garlanded chariot driven by a lightly dressed charioteer of his favorite regiment. A haughty Greek slave held a laurel wreath over his head, chanting the old prescribed ritual: "You are only a man. You have been favored by the gods. Beware, lest you forget from whom your powers flow."

Sandra couldn't make out the full ritual, because of the cheers of the crowd, and her greater curiosity over the appearance and nature of the man who was Maximian's closest friend.

Titus Flavius Vespasianus was neither as darkly handsome as his young brother Domitian nor as much the "peasant soldier" as his father. From his appearance he might have been

a patrician like his friend Max. But this did not preclude a certain ruthless quality that she had never known in Max. It might explain the terrible destruction of Judea's most important city and its great temple, acts which certainly put an end to the rebellion. Someone called out from the crowd, and General Titus laughed heartily. He looked suddenly genial, open, and easygoing. Much more like a man who would be Max's friend. His easy laughter showed him at his best, and in some ways Sandra thought him more attractive than Domitian, in whom dark fires always seemed to be raging.

She said aloud, "He is very impressive, this General Titus. And yet, he permitted the destruction of Jerusalem."

Acté said softly, "Perhaps it was God's will. After all, it was the Sanhedrin—the religious council of Judea—that demanded His crucifixion."

"His? Whose?"

"Nothing. I meant simply that this was an act of justice for the killing of our Lord."

Sandra was shocked at these vengeful ideas. It showed her a new side of Claudia Acté, who had always seemed almost too godlike to be human. She was very human, indeed, and her terrible idea of revenge for the death of some lordly fellow of her acquaintance was more puzzling than anything else about her. Still, it might have something to do with her religion, in which a fish represented the name and title of her chief god.

"Your religion certainly is intolerant. Not like the Roman pantheon."

"No," Acté agreed, after waving and cheering as General Titus passed. "Our religion is the true one. All others are a mockery. Ah! There is your General Max. How handsome he looks! Wave. He is looking at you."

Forgetting such nonessentials as religion, Sandra turned quickly and put her fingers to her lips. Max understood. She made out his smile, the way his own fingers went to his mouth. Casual but visible to her. The sight of him reminded her that a decision would have to be made on their future. In spite of Max's optimism about Vespasian, Sandra felt less sure. Though he had a reputation for fairness and honesty, the emperor did not look like a man easily swayed by sentiment. She could only hope.

Following the generals in the procession came the plunder taken with the crushing of the rebellion against King Agrippa and Queen Berenice. The strange oriental sect of One God

had long been accepted in Rome. Unlike the new and troublesome Christian sect, the Jews worked within the tolerant Roman religious system, and many citizens, seeing the sacred gold and silver relics of the famed Jerusalem temple in the procession, grumbled that Roman soldiers had been used to support a Jewish king and queen whose subjects did not want them.

In the ordinary course of an imperial triumph the chained captives following the plunder of the rebellious province would have been preceded by the edifying sight of the provincial ruler in chains. Today, that ruler, Queen Berenice of Judea, rode in an open litter, as if she herself had triumphed.

Her dark hair was crowned by a diadem, indicative of her rank. Her very proper Roman gown was bedecked with necklaces and gold greaves above her wrists. A beautiful woman, as the thousands lining the street could see, but she affected these chauvinistic Romans exactly as her predecessor, Queen Cleopatra, had affected the Roman Republic. She was more than ordinarily attractive, from the mystic East, the mistress of a great Roman general, and therefore dangerous. Her passing brought boos and hisses from the crowd. Queen Berenice's full lips smiled at the sounds, but as her sloe eyes gazed out at the angry faces, Sandra read a veiled fear that Sandra herself understood.

Sandra could see both sides of the drama. The mobs hatred of the Jewish queen was obvious, but Sandra's own sympathies were with Berenice. In some ways her own situation was like that of Berenice. She too was a foreigner who loved a great Roman general. Possibly neither woman's love would ever be fulfilled.

Still, she had little interest in the troubles of a faraway country like Judea. She found herself worrying incessantly about her own future with Max, and even Max's message of love and encouragement delivered by Theron that night did not reassure her.

Max himself came out to visit Sandra the next day. He was delighted with the emperor's first day in Rome. Sandra and Acté listened to him with rising enthusiasm as he described the simplicity of Vespasian and the man's concern for the welfare of his people, so unlike his recent predecessors.

Acté reminded them sadly, "Nero began like that. He meant well. Yet, the pressures of his mother, and the praise of all those dreadful hangers-on . . . but you speak of Vespasian as a man, not a god. It is a great step."

"Vespasian himself insists on it. I have known him all my life. He is truly what he seems to be. A simple, frugal, sensible man, and a superb administrator."

Sandra had nothing to say about the man. She had seen emperors come and go and finally reached the point where she asked herself only, Will he help Max and me? Or will he let his daughter wheedle him into refusing? She was going to make her own judgment of him based solely upon selfish motives.

Considering all the matters that must have been brought to the emperor's attention during those first days, it surprised Acté to learn that Vespasian would receive in audience a "speaking-tool called Sandra, the property of Lord Domitian."

She tried to encourage her friend. "Less than a week has passed. It is gracious of him to take the time out of his busy day. A good omen."

"I don't know. It may be a bad omen. I haven't seen Max today. Maybe the emperor just wants to get rid of our problem in a hurry."

"So much the better. He can't refuse General Max, his most loyal aide."

Her old friend the centurion Enobarbus had arrived as escort to her audience with the emperor. She dressed in a neat gown of creamy white with Grecian designs in crimson and a crimson cloak, but in spite of her great care to look "respectable," the gown and cloak clung to her figure sensuously. Enobarbus whistled at sight of her.

"Do I look respectable?" she asked anxiously. "Tell me the truth, Barbus. I don't want to prejudice the emperor in any way."

Enobarbus grinned. "The old man's human. I don't see how he can fail to like you just the way you are. And a sight prettier than that skinny daughter of his. You come along now. You'll win him over quick."

Max had provided a litter for her, but even the fact that he had sent Enobarbus seemed a bad sign. Why not come himself at such a time so that they could face Vespasian together? On the journey into the city she tried to get an inkling of the truth out of Enobarbus, but he shared her ignorance.

"You know Max. Conscientious and all. He was closeted with the old man all morning. Probably planning the Parthian campaign."

It was most likely, she agreed, ashamed of her own selfish concerns when the eternal war with the Central Asian Empire of Parthia continued to give Max and Vespasian so much trouble. There was no reason in the world why the affairs of a "speaking-tool named Sandra" should take precedence over the welfare of Roman soldiers on the far frontier.

She tried to remind herself of these more important matters as Enobarbus escorted her up the Palatine Hill and across a portico to her audience with the emperor.

Unfortunately, the first person she saw on the portico was the young General Domitian, looking consciously handsome in his new emperor's uniform with the white-crested helmet and the short cape flaring in the breeze. Pretending to look straight ahead, she hoped to avoid him, but he was persistent. He chose to make himself seen by drawing his sword and laughingly thrusting out the flat side in her path.

"You are looking your beautiful self, Sandra. Shall I tell you what is going to happen to you?"

She was nervous enough without this and said impatiently, "My lord, you are behaving like a child. Let me pass."

Somewhat discomfited, he restored his sword to its sheath. "It was only a joke." She turned away, but the sudden tension in his voice held her. "You think Max is a greater soldier than I am. You'll see soon enough. I'll be my father's heir. Then I'll be greater than Max."

She knew she should not argue with him, but she couldn't help the sharp reminder, "There is still your brother Titus. Your older brother."

Furious at a painful truth, he blurted out incautiously, "Ancaris won't let that happen. She's sworn Titus won't be Father's heir. And when Titus falls, Max will die with him. You will see."

"My lord, you ramble. Be a man. Stop making idle threats. Come, Enobarbus. We are late."

But she could not be deaf to Domitian's last words: "They aren't idle threats. Max and Titus are doomed. You will see."

Enobarbus took the ravings of the emperor's son very lightly. While he and Sandra walked through the labyrinth of the palace, he dismissed Domitian as she had tried to do.

"You're right not to take him seriously. The lad has envied Titus since he was born. And General Max is Titus' best friend."

"I know. And if it were only Domitian, I could smile. But nothing is beyond Ancaris. She adores Domitian. And I keep

remembering other women with Ancaris' power. They say Empress Agrippina poisoned her husband to make Nero emperor. And I wonder what Ancaris is capable of."

"Best say nothing of this to the emperor. He's prejudiced about his daughter anyway."

They were silent then as they approached what Sandra thought of as her fate.

Chapter Sixteen

Sandra had expected to be led into one of those great pillared chambers so beloved of Otho and Nero. Instead, she and the centurion stopped in a bare, austere antechamber which Sandra recognized as the room that had once belonged to Claudia Acté in the days of Nero's principate.

An elegant but much used ebony and citrus-wood table stood in the center of the room. There was a large, high-backed chair behind it, the only "imperial" furnishing in the room. Otherwise, there were several stools, a cerule chair, and a tabaret holding maps. Other maps had fallen to the floor and rolled up. The room seemed exactly the sort of setting in which to find an active field general.

Sandra was startled when the inner door opened and Maximian walked out. He came directly to Sandra, took both her hands, and drew her to him. Just before she kissed him she thought he looked worn and tired. Not like himself at all. The news must be bad.

"My darling." He kissed her, and she responded with a rising passion that he always aroused in her.

When she could speak, with her conscience haunting her over his effort for her sake, she murmured, "Let me go away from Rome. Anything. I can't bear to have you suffer for it."

Instead of reassuring him, this only ignited his anger.

"My life is my own. And I choose to live it with you. Now, stop this talk."

He had shaken her with a vehemence that surprised her. She stared up at him, not fully understanding.

"I want you to be happy, Max—my lord. Tell me what I must say when Caesar questions me. I will do it."

"Don't call me 'my lord.'"

"Max! Tell me what to do."

"You must say we love each other. We will marry if the laws allow it. If not, we will still be husband and wife in our own eyes."

She nodded, watching every nuance, sensing that his manner was unnatural in spite of his reassurance.

"You have spoken to the emperor about us?"

He avoided her question, pulling her to him again, trying to tell her something that he couldn't express clearly in words. His avoidance of the subject of the emperor worried her more than anything he might have told her. She looked into his troubled eyes, read the tenderness there and something else, a deep anxiety that further unnerved her. "*Carissima*, would you leave with me today? At once?"

"Of course, I will go. Now. Must I see the emperor? I'd rather leave with you."

The inner door opened again. A grizzled, uniformed veteran motioned to Sandra. Ordinarily she would have been amused at the difference between this veteran legionary and the secretaries of previous emperors. But at this moment she wanted only to remain with Max, to find out what troubled him.

The soldier announced, "Caesar will give audience to the slave of the Lord Domitian. You are named Sandra?"

"The Lady Lysandra," she began, then realized this was no time to anger the emperor or his aides. "Yes. I am Sandra." She looked at Max. He still had her hands as she asked, "Shall I see him?"

Max squeezed her hands before letting them go.

"Remember. I love you and I want you. Never forget."

What was he afraid of? He couldn't possibly believe anything Vespasian said or threatened would change her feelings. She kissed him quickly but lovingly, despite the old veteran.

"They can't do anything to make me forget."

She went into the next room then, ushered in with a sweeping hand by the veteran. All the oriental opulence of Nero's chamber had been rearranged or removed; she found herself in a room even more Spartan than the antechamber. An army camp bed, a work table, several stools, a wall of maps and reports on wax tablets, and Emperor Vespasian in uniform, standing with sturdy legs apart, staring out the long window embrasure at Rome on this late-autumn day.

Without addressing her by name, or turning to face her, he asked no one in particular, "Can we rebuild, return to the Rome of our fathers? A building program is only one answer, of course. Our colossal new amphitheatre, the largest in the world, built on the very site of Nero's Golden House—that

might be a beginning. A great project for the people, not for Caesar alone. And plenty of work, well paid. The hiring of slaves as well. . . . What do you think?"

He swung around, his sword sheath rubbing against the work table as he faced her. She decided he must have been born with a scowl, but there was a sensibility about his heavy face that gave her a little hope.

"I do not know for sure, Caesar. I am a foreigner, born in Gaul. Rome looks very impressive to me as it is. Except for the beautiful Temple of Jupiter. That was a dreadful loss."

"Dreadful, yes. My younger son was nearly lost with it. . . . Why don't you like him?"

Taken aback, she stammered, "but I—respect the Lord Domitian. It is only that I was born a free woman. I cannot feel that I am the property of any man. Or woman."

"My daughter Ancaris," he agreed with a knowing spark of humor that told her he was well aware of the animosity between the two women. He moved slowly up to the table, still squinting at her, giving her his shrewd appraisal. "You aren't quite what my daughter said you were." She raised her chin proudly. He ignored this, but added on an ironic note, "Nor quite what my younger son claimed you were—a Circe, an enchantress. I don't believe in enchantresses."

"Nor do I, Caesar. I am simply a woman. Like your daughter."

He raised one stubby finger to show her that she had scored against him.

"Woman, I have read the evidence that changed your life. Your father's crime for which you paid. But it is the law. And you were legitimately sold to my son. You understand that."

"I have learned to understand it, excellency."

He slapped the table suddenly, making her jump.

"I don't like it. I admit it. I am inclined to put an effort in motion to free you."

Her eyes widened with hope. She could hardly believe she had heard him correctly.

"Oh, Caesar, if you could—if you would return my life to me—let me be my own mistress—I would do anything!"

She could see that she had pleased him. He nodded, considered a map unrolled on the table. A dagger lay at one end of the roll, holding it open. He took up the dagger, moved it until it pointed to some area on Syria's desert border. He looked up. "My daughter is very dear to me. I may tell you . . .

Lysandra. That is your name? My daughter's husband, General Maximian, has made insinuations to me about my daughter and their child. I can forgive him because I know what a sudden new passion may do to a man in his middle years. But divorce in such circumstances would tarnish my daughter's reputation forever. Of course, legally, Max and my daughter may divorce at any time. Divorce is free to all in Rome."

She caught her breath, daring to think he might be on their side. He took up the dagger, tested its point on his thumb.

"I have no legal power to forbid him his divorce. My powers are in the military line." He hesitated. She thought her heart would stop. The threat was still to come.

"Yes, excellency. But if there is so much unhappiness between General Maximian and Lady Ancaris . . ."

She didn't like his forced smile.

"The Lady Ancaris assures me this is not the case. Her life and that of my grandson will be ruined if her husband discards her. All the lies about my grandson would be given credence."

She dared to remind him, "But Caesar, if the law allows him a divorce, and he chooses—"

"Then, Lysandra, you must ask yourself if one woman for whom he feels a brief and sensual passion is enough to occupy all the rest of his life."

She found her mouth dry and had to try again before the words came out.

"How can that be? He has been a soldier all his life. That is what occupies him, excellency. Serving Rome. And you."

"No one knows that better than his commander. But much as I value him, I will not have him desert my daughter and shame my grandson. If he does so . . ." He forced the dagger through the map, his action followed by her fascinated gaze. "Then he will no longer serve in our legions. That much power I do have."

"You can't! Not even you, Caesar!"

He didn't seem offended. Something very like admiration at her courage lighted his face. But he assured her, "You would be surprised at the power of an emperor, the ultimate imperator of the armies. Even I was surprised. But I explained this very carefully to General Maximian. I showed him the two sides of the coin. And he made his choice. A bad choice based on a bodily weakness, not his good sense. He chose to leave Rome with you. To spend the rest of his

life as a homeless wanderer, his career and service to the empire blasted forever . . . or during my lifetime."

There was a terrible ring of truth to this. It was so very like Maximian, who would honor his promise to her even at this price. It explained his strange attitude toward her in the antechamber. He had tried to tell her that he would sacrifice his entire future for her and she must abide by his decision.

Vespasian watched the conflicting emotions in her face and manner. He was an astute man, as she rapidly became aware. She had no doubt his sympathy was genuine too, but nothing would supersede his care for his daughter, except the welfare of Rome. He brought this up now as his heaviest weapon.

"There is much that is worthy in you. More than my son sees, I'm sure. But ask yourself if your affection, your bodily charms, are worth more than the service to which Lucius Maximian Claudius had devoted his life since his fourteenth year."

She tried for one last, bold effort.

"If he is worth so much, excellency, how can you destroy his career, his chance to serve Rome?"

The cords in his heavy neck and cheek tightened. He turned away from her. She wondered if she had angered him beyond any hope. He said after a moment, "Very true. I will be honest. But besides this there is my daughter's fate. And most important, my grandchild. If Max divorces my daughter, the whole world will say the child is not his."

She began eagerly, "Then why doesn't the Lady Ancaris divorce General Max and name me as the cause?"

He laughed with an abruptness that told her she had failed. "You know my daughter very little if you think she would so humiliate herself. She likes being the wife of a great Claudian patrician. My family was nothing. Good country people. Plebeians. And since Ancaris was unfortunately not legitimate herself, she feels even more strongly about holding onto the Claudian name."

She clasped and unclasped her hands nervously, walking up and down. He did not watch her. She thought that in spite of his firmness he was ashamed of the choice he forced upon her. He seemed to be scowling more heavily than ever as he studied the blank, unadorned wall and waited for her decision.

It was so obvious there was nothing to debate. Max had known her not quite three years. He had known the life of the legion for almost twenty years. She understood enough of

human nature to realize that all the sexual passion in the world could not match the deep attachment he must have to the career of a lifetime. She remembered how often, when he visited her at Acté's villa, they talked of his work, administrative or military. And even when he was recuperating at the Pompeiian villa, his whole face would light up when he described to her early battles, plans, sieges. It was his whole life.

She made one objection now, but the very phrasing of it told the emperor he had won.

"General Max is waiting for me out there. He asked me to promise I wouldn't let anything come between us. How will he believe I have changed my mind so quickly? He will know you have forced me in some way."

"I have thought it all out." He faced her again. "You are a strange woman. You've asked nothing about your own situation since I told you what would happen to General Maximian. Aren't you curious to know the other side of the coin?"

"No," she said shortly. "If I do, all this becomes nothing but a despicable bargain."

"Yet Max would understand a bargain."

She started to deny it with a fierceness that made her belated agreement hurt even more.

"I can't do it. I promised him. He will never forgive me."

"Well?"

The emperor's simple question said everything. This was what must be done. She made one effort that was more a reminder than a threat. "Excellency, have you thought how General Max will feel about serving under you after this?"

"He reminded me of that."

The flat statement shook her. "And still you would trust him with your armies?"

"I know him better than you do, woman. Within weeks he will be relieved that you made the choice. It saved him from doing so."

She knew he was right. In spite of her threat, General Max would give his best to the service of the legions, as he always had.

"Are you yourself now? Can you show the proper enthusiasm?" he asked then, without any hypocritical sympathy. "I may be of help when I explain that you will be freed and suitably rewarded."

"Don't!"

"Very well. May I trust you?"

She knew what he meant. Despair mingled with her anger. She hated this man who had guided Max's career and now was willing to destroy it to protect a woman like Ancaris. At the same time she was aware that she herself was the interloper in a marriage, and in other circumstances she might have envied Ancaris such a devoted father.

"Trust me, Caesar."

They went out to the antechamber, the emperor escorting her with care, almost as if she really were his daughter.

She was not stupid enough to pretend she had been pleased by what would clearly be Vespasian's bribe. She looked very much as she had looked when she went in to meet the emperor. But the old excitement, the pulse-pounding joy, was gone.

"My lord," she began reaching for Max's hands in spite of the emperor's presence. "If you say we will go away from Rome together, then I must agree." She sensed the emperor's quick turn of the head, the way he watched her, wondering if she had fooled him.

Max started to take her into his arms but held her away from him, studying her face in a troubled way.

"You *must* agree? I would never force you, *carissima*." He looked over at Vespasian. "You can be very persuasive, commander. But did you tell her I made my own choice, since loyalty seems to count for very little?"

Vespasian was stern but understanding, probably because he saw himself as the winner.

"I offered the Lady Lysandra what you refused to offer. Her freedom. Country property. An allowance suitable to keep the lady for her life."

Sandra winced, seeing how this put Max at a disadvantage. As though he had turned down Sandra's freedom, safety, and riches for a wretched future of his own.

Max stared at Sandra, holding her before him. She wondered if he could read her heart. She almost hoped he could. "The commander told me he could offer you this. But I thought we would be happier together."

With an effort she forced down her desperate and torn feelings. But some of her tenderness crept in as she said, "We wouldn't be happy, my lord. Not if you left the army."

"You don't mean that."

She couldn't bring herself to lie again. She was silent. Her throat ached with the effort to keep from clinging to him,

begging him to take her away, beyond the edges of the world. Beyond Rome.

Vespasian saved the moment. "Max, all you ever wanted was command of the Syrian legions. I give it to you. Lady Lysandra, you told me what it meant to you to be free. Now, you both have what you dreamed of. You should be happy. Be happy, my children!"

Sandra recovered her wits. She wanted to end this anguish. She said in a bright, brittle voice, "I can never express my deep gratitude, your excellency. To belong to myself again, with my own house and my own servants. The life I used to know before General Maximian executed my father."

She knew as soon as she made the accusation that she had succeeded beyond even Vespasian's hopes.

Max looked as if he had taken a body blow. He backed away. It took him a minute to get his breath. Sandra wanted desperately to say something, explain, deny, but nothing happened in the awkward silence. Then Max gave his commander a military salute with his fist against his breast.

"You were right, commander. Your weapons were more powerful than mine." He was about to leave, but glanced once more at Sandra. "I do understand, *carissima*. I know what your freedom means to you. I can hardly blame you for that. . . . Commander, you will find me camped with the Twenty-fourth Legion when you need me. Farewell."

Sandra started forward, but the emperor's strong fingers held her back. She watched until Max was out of sight. She felt too numb to cry. It had all happened so suddenly she still wasn't prepared.

Vespasian released her. He was as matter-of-fact as if he gave orders to his staff.

"So. I must do my part. I will see that you are purchased from Domitian and manumitted in my presence."

"But will your daughter agree?"

He didn't seem to resent the implication.

"Certainly. If you will swear upon your sacred gods never to be private with General Maximian. In return, she offers you the Pompeiian villa that was the property of her husband's family, and in which, she tells me, you were recently very happy. I will see to it that a respectable sum of money is placed with the banking house of Regulus and Sons in Pompeii on the nones of every month for your maintenance. Are you satisfied?"

She shrugged.

The emperor took this for assent. He led her to the door. A man stood in the corridor, just to one side of the door. She started back at sight of Domitian, who was looking pale, even anxious, as he stared at her. The emperor said in his brisk, businesslike way, "Escort the Lady Lysandra to her litter. She will be returning here tomorrow and we will personally take her to the Capitoline for her manumission."

"Yes, Father." Domitian saluted and took her hand. Either he had forgotten his previous threats, or he hoped to make her forget them. He was touchingly eager to please her. When they were beyond his father's hearing, he said, "I want to be present when that happens, Lady Lysandra. And do you know something?"

"What?" she asked without caring.

"I'm glad you are free. Now I can woo you the way Max did. You see how sincere I am."

She smiled. "You are very sincere. I never doubted it."

"Inside a month, you'll come to my bed, and I wager you will never think twice about Max again."

What a fuss he made over a woman who could never love him! For the first time she looked at him with pity and, almost, with gratitude.

PART FOUR:

Chapter One

In spite of Domitian's youthful optimism, he did not get Lysandra into his bed in a month. Or even a year, though he pursued the matter when his army service did not take him abroad over his sister's shrill cries of outrage at his possible danger.

In the end it was Domitian who came to Lysandra's bed in her villa at Pompeii on one of his many persistent visits. It was shortly after Lysandra heard the news buzzing through the court and her own household that on General Max's most recent return to Rome he had made love to one of the slave women in the service of the Judean Queen Berenice.

Unaware of the coincidence, Domitian had visited Lysandra in Pompeii only an hour after she learned of the liaison from the gossip of old Bacchus, the caretaker. Domitian had intended to flaunt his conquest of a popular courtesan, a blonde enchantress. When Lysandra agreed calmly that he had made a good choice and she wished him happiness in the affair, he grew so angry that it took him some minutes to discover his unconquered Lysandra was crying.

He leaped to the typical male conclusion that she was weeping over his betrayal of her with the courtesan. She let him continue in this illusion. Before the water clock had registered another hour she was being consoled on the couch, where, as she realized bitterly, she and Max had consummated their love during that terrifying and glorious summer of Max's recuperation.

Despite Daphne's praise, Domitian was a driving, forceful lover anxious to accomplish one thing, the penetration of a

mystery that had long been forbidden to him. Once he reached his goal and his vanity was satisfied, his female partner had served his purpose. His sexual member was impressive in size as well as in skill, but he only made her body burn for Max's tenderness.

It was not the last time Domitian made love to her during those months when she still dreamed of Maximian, but she knew that she cheated more than Domitian did, for she tried to pretend he was the man she loved.

When she realized the months were becoming years, she grew disgusted with herself and encouraged Daphne to keep him occupied. The redhead obliged with alacrity.

Telling herself she had more business in Rome involving the sale of the popular Pompeiian wine, and the fruits she and Bacchus grew in the expanded garden of the villa, Lysandra began to be seen often in Rome. Thanks to Domitian and the hospitable Daphne, Lysandra was invited to banquets among the imperial family, and in spite of her deep prejudice, she learned to respect Emperor Vespasian. Not in the least like Ancaris or his younger son, he was open, frank, a teller of funny if off-color stories, and a man who could not easily be fooled by anyone serving him.

Lysandra's connections with the imperial family gave her the chance to bring small gifts to the spoiled but charming young Flavius, who resembled Perseus more and more every day. As a result, she and Ancaris had an armed truce, which neither broke so long as Lysandra and Max avoided each other on his infrequent visits to the city. Max's career flourished. He had rescued two Danube legions with an army half the size of the enemy, and was now widely considered the superior of Titus, though the emperor's son joked about it himself and remained Max's good friend.

"After all," he reminded his hearers in Lysandra's presence, "when I am emperor I will need the best soldier in the empire on my side."

Whenever Max was praised, Lysandra still felt all the pride of a woman in love, but on this occasion she noticed the quick furious exchange of glances between Ancaris and Domitian. Lysandra knew their anger was not directed at Ancaris' husband, the great soldier, but at Titus, who reminded them of his own future accession to the throne. There was no love lost between the half brother and sister. Their very natures precluded sympathy, Titus being as open and direct as his father, and Ancaris devious and subtle.

In spite of her reasonable contentment with the Pompeiian villa and its prosperous garden produce, Lysandra often thought that she really existed for her visits to Rome. She took care not to meet Maximian, but there was a kind of masochistic enjoyment in discovering when General Max visited Rome and what he did there.

In the Old Forum the latest news of the court, called the *Acta Diurna*, was posted on several adjoining white boards. All the local gossips stopped there each day to memorize the details or, if properly equipped, jot them down in an illegible shorthand for reading by other interested citizens throughout the countryside.

Lysandra, who had begun to be called the Lady Lysandra after the precedent set by Emperor Vespasian, twisted her freedman's ring nervously as she read the news of the *Acta Diurna*. Visiting Rome from her Pompeiian villa, she came all too often by the Old Forum boards to follow the latest gossip. She was particularly apt to be seen in this area when the emperor's son-in-law, General Maximian, returned to Rome for a brief visit. After that, her friend Daphne could be counted on to report the general's curious behavior on the Palatine during his infrequent visits.

"Never sleeps with that hag he's married to, my dear," Daphne said one spring day, knowing quite well why Lysandra had stopped in the Forum to read the *Acta Diurna* on the white boards. "Not that Ancaris should care. She's been the mistress of Senator Fulvius for just ages."

"Daphne, how can you possibly know all these sleeping arrangements?" In spite of this pretended indifference, Lysandra covered her throat casually with her hand. She was afraid her rapid pulsebeat when she discussed Max would give her away.

"You'd be surprised how much we know about each other, those of us who are in and out of the palace. I'm still with the Lord Domitian quite often. But you know about that. And it was all over the Palatine last July when your Max slept with Queen Berenice's maid."

"I'm sure it was." The knowledge still burned, but Lysandra, knowing her friend's all too human malice, had contrived as best she could to hide the hurt. "So General Maximian returns to Rome tomorrow. That means I had better leave for Pompeii."

"How silly! As if you can't meet when others are present. There's no harm in that." Daphne waved the ends of her vio-

let palla, fanning herself. Year by year, even month by month, the red-haired enchantress seemed to add to those bodily curves that certain patricians, including the emperor's son Domitian, found so inviting. On his visits to Lysandra's Pompeiian villa he flung up the plump but still gorgeous Daphne as a rival and was annoyed that Lysandra now refused to show signs of jealousy.

"It isn't a matter of keeping my word to the emperor," Lysandra admitted to Daphne's suggestion. "It's simply that General Maximian doesn't want me present. At the Saturnalia banquet they tell me he walked out when he caught sight of me."

Daphne's tawny eyebrows went up, but, ever the optimist, she tucked her arm in her friend's and coaxed, "Come up to dinner on the Palatine with Domitian and me tonight. He's invited his brother Titus and Queen Berenice. A family affair. But maybe General Max will arrive tonight and drop in at my apartments for the wine, if nothing else. And Domitian will be in a good mood if you're there."

"No, thank you. Not this time. You are very generous with your lovers." Lysandra laughed and helped her friend into the expensive silken litter whose six attendants had stopped all foot traffic on the crowded Sacred Way in order to oblige their mistress.

Daphne looked out between the gauze curtains to say, "As for my generosity, there's always another male. If I've learned anything, I've learned that. But if you change your mind, come along. Do. There's a dear." They embraced in high good humor with each other, and then as Daphne went jolting off in her litter, she looked back, calling to Lysandra, "You might invite us to your Pompeii house. After we've visited there, Domitian always gives me some trinket or other. To spite you, I suppose."

Lysandra nodded and waved to her. But her mood was less buoyant when she found herself alone except for Acté's quiet servant Noriah, who had come to Lysandra as her companion and maid. The arrangement was Acté's, and Lysandra welcomed it, although she suspected this was Acté's effort to introduce her curious religion into the irreligious Lysandra's life. Whatever Noriah's worship of fish, or the Greek anagram of a fish, she had only one handicap. She was much too good, too pure, and utterly unlike the addepleted, delightful gossip Daphne.

"The Lady Daphne, she lives on the Palatine with the Caesars?" Noriah asked.

"Now and then. It seems that the emperor's son Domitian has taken a fancy to her. Not surprising. She is delightful in her way."

"For a fat woman she has a very pretty face," Noriah said, dismissing the beauteous Daphne.

The two women walked up the Sacred Way. Noriah was not a person you could make small talk with, and they were silent, so that it became easier to hear the furor around two foreign women at the top of the slope. They were escorted by a pair of huge Nubians in flashing oriental jewels which were bound to attract too much attention among these tumultuous Roman citizens and slaves.

Although the city was filled with visitors from every country in the civilized world, Lysandra had little doubt that General Titus' mistress, Queen Berenice, was the recipient of all this unpleasantness. She had gone home to her own country after the great victory of Vespasian and Titus, but on Titus' return to Rome the Jewish queen came with him.

Lysandra and the queen had met through Daphne's social aspirations. Lysandra knew that the queen's love affair was a deep and probably lifetime passion, and Lysandra sympathized, understanding what the lovers suffered when apart. But she also heard the Roman people whose hatred of the oriental enchantress, the "Harlot of Judea," was all too vocal.

The Nubians were pushing the troublemakers in front of them, chiefly young out-of-work males who had just returned from the free seats at the Circus Maximus. Behind this frontal assault, a few women from the Cattle Forum and the Fish Market on the Tiber began to throw stones.

Lysandra made her way to the side of the two victims, who were looking more affronted than frightened, as they had every right to be, if they knew the power of the Roman mob. When Lysandra reached the side of the queen, she was stopped by Berenice's companion, a dark-complexioned Egyptian woman with tightly wound braids of hair that made her look like Medusa with serpents entwined around her long head. She scarcely softened as she made out Lysandra's identity.

"You!"

"Who is it, Miri?" the queen asked crossly and then saw Lysandra. "My dear, come and walk back to the palace with me. What dreadful savages these Romans are! And to think,

all I wanted to do was to draw some money from my bankers on the Latin Way! But old Nurse here antagonizes them. I shall feel safer with you."

Ignoring the Egyptian's contemptuously curled lip, Lysandra said, "Your majesty is kind."

"No. Merely frank." Queen Berenice gave a little peal of laughter. "We are said to look alike. If they are going to murder one of us, it may be you."

Lysandra was amused but pleaded, "I must be returning to Acté's house and then pack for the trip home. I have been away from my vineyards too long."

"Pompeii. Enchanting town. We love your villa. Titus insists he will buy that large estate on the slopes of Mt. Vesuvius beyond your villa. Poor man. He actually believes he may succeed Emperor Vespasian and still keep his 'oriental bitch' as his mistress."

"Majesty!"

"True. I have heard what they call me." The queen flinched as a sharp piece of paving stone missed her cheek by a finger's length and the boy who had thrown it wriggled out of the grasp of one of the Nubians. "There," the queen went on. "Are you answered? Now, will you let me take you to the Palatine to enjoy a cup of that delicious wine you were kind enough to send to Titus?"

In an effort to hurry the queen out of this troublesome district, Lysandra turned and walked up with her toward Victory Hill Street and the Palatine.

Lysandra's maid, Noriah, was so highly respectable that her presence beside the lanky Egyptian somewhat puzzled the crowd and gave the women a chance to walk onward, out of a more violent danger.

Just as they crossed to the foot of the Palatine Steps a pebble, wildly thrown, struck Lysandra on the neck. She was more infuriated by the humiliation of not being able to return the blow than by the sting that had drawn blood. One of the Nubians turned indignantly, but the culprit had been swallowed up by the crowd, who tittered at the success of the cowardly attack.

"Must your majesty endure this sort of thing whenever you leave the Palatine?" Lysandra asked, after touching her neck beneath the thick, straight black hair and finding blood on her fingers.

The queen tapped Lysandra's hand gently. "I am sorry. I

seem to laugh, to make jokes of it. But it is painful to know how I am hated without cause."

There were causes, as Lysandra knew perfectly well. The queen dressed differently, wore jewels like an oriental satrap's daughter, always appeared with the Nubians, unmistakable in their splendid, dazzling uniforms, and besides all else, she persisted in keeping their hero Titus from fathering an heir to the throne with some worthy Roman matron.

The irony of the queen's situation struck Lysandra also. But she liked the friendly, attractive queen and knew it would serve no purpose to remind her of the defeated Judean people whose ruler lived like an empress in the country of their conqueror.

They entered the palace by the nearest doors and the narrow, dusty passage taken by Lysandra on the night she had first arrived in Rome. The queen noted the way Lysandra pulled her cream-and-gold palla around her shoulders and hips as she passed one unobtrusive door and asked curiously, "Are we not to touch these walls? What do they hide? Lepers?"

The years had never erased Lysandra's memory of the hours spent with the eunuch. She had been younger then, not so experienced. Perhaps the indignity had mattered more in those days. She laughed.

"Worse. A large, pale spider."

She knew Helios was still busy spinning his webs among the denizens of the palace. He provided the emperor with good, inexpensive imperial secretaries, and since Vespasian was fond of saving money, Helios had become immensely popular in that quarter. He furnished Domitian with women, either slaves or patricians, and he knew the secrets of the small, exclusive city of government servants who inhabited the Palatine.

Wondering what a "large, pale spider" looked like, Queen Berenice looked back just as Helios opened the door and strode out, bowing to her with all his familiar feline grace.

"Majesty. I heard voices. Is there any way I may oblige you?"

Lysandra was sure he had heard her insulting description, but true to his nature he was polite to her as well. "The Lady Lysandra, too. From head to toe, as completely lovely as ever, I see."

She hoped she retained her self-possession, but she knew all his remarks hinted at that obscene knowledge of the slave Sandra's body.

The queen, who had a slight acquaintance with Helios, waved to him. "Thank you, no, Lord Helios. I was almost attacked in your city streets, but the god of my fathers was with me, and I arrived safely." She smiled at Lysandra, motioned imperiously for the two servants and the Nubians to follow, and went on through the passage. It was clear that the queen assumed Lysandra's slur on the eunuch had been a sour joke.

Helios joined Lysandra, ignoring her useless attempt to outwalk him. In his low, smooth voice he murmured, "Are we Romans brought so low that we take orders from foreign queens now? Is this Jewish harlot to be our next empress?"

Lysandra swung her arm up and slapped his cheek.

Too far ahead to have heard Helios, the queen turned to see what delayed Lysandra and was witness to the slap. She gasped. Helios looked suitably shocked, and had his revenge when Lysandra could not think of any explanation she might offer Berenice for her display of bad manners and worse temper.

The women went silently up the stone steps to the more elaborate pillared corridors overhead, and Lysandra excused herself, saying she had to call upon a friend. Luckily, Daphne would be in Domitian's apartments, preparing for the banquet they were giving that night.

Delighted to see her as usual, although in the middle of a momentous decision between a choice of jeweled gowns, Daphne thought the whole scene involving Helios had been uproarious.

"And you couldn't very well say he had insulted you by some sexual move. Not the eunuch." Daphne thought about the chamberlain for a minute. "Do you know, I have paraded naked before him. I have tried every trick I know, and he refuses to be moved by me."

"Don't let's talk any more about him," Lysandra said quickly. "Tell me which gown you will wear, the purple or the green. With your hair it is a shame not to wear the green. And all those emeralds you love to make us jealous of."

Daphne giggled and hugged the purple gown. "But when I wear the amethysts, I can imagine I am Emperor Nero's mother, parading in all my finery. Take poison, you there! . . . Here's a dish of mushrooms, my beloved husband, they'll put you to sleep. . . . Slit your wrists, my rival! What a thing it must be to have such power!"

But in the end she wore the emeralds and the green gauze,

because, as she said, "The Lord Titus once told me it was his favorite color, and if I could take him away from that Jewess—well!"

"Not again, please, Daphne. I got into enough trouble slapping that eunuch."

She took this as an excuse to leave the Palatine. She was tired of fighting the battles of a queen who had no idea there were battles to fight. But Daphne begged her to stay for an hour, at least.

"Go into the private baths and talk to the emperor. He's in an odd mood. A little depressed. He's there with Domitian, and you know they never did have much in common. But, they both like you, and the emperor hasn't been too well lately. Cheer him up."

"I ought to hate him. He is responsible for all my misery."

Daphne teased her, "Nobody can look like you and be miserable. You may be jealous of the women Max takes in your place, but that's a different thing entirely. Besides, you've had Domitian as a lover, and you could have anyone else, if only you wouldn't be so particular."

"Unlike you, I compare all possible lovers with . . . well, never mind. I'll go and be nice to your precious emperor."

In spite of the pain and loss Vespasian had caused her, Lysandra couldn't help being flattered at the notion of cheering up the mighty ruler of the Roman Empire. She made her way across the palace corridors, in and out of audience chambers, all full of petitioners, civil servants, senators, and foreigners seeking audience, who would be processed by Vespasian's excellent secretaries and then brought to his attention. The public itself could often see him in the city gardens, where he made himself available to anyone who sought him out.

Even Lysandra, with her feeling that he had betrayed her and Max, was aware that there had not been so efficient an emperor since the great Augustus. No one remained in his service who was not at the top of his form, and Lysandra wondered how such a man could have told his most efficient general that his service in the army was ended if he continued his liaison with the slave woman Sandra. It was strange that after such knowledge Max could have continued to serve him.

Lysandra came to the quiet pool where, years ago, she had first seen the young Domitian huddled on the side of the pool, reading. He had been jealous then, quick to anger, his narrow black eyes dangerous when he spoke of fancied injus-

tices to himself. In the years since, he had grown into a fine figure of a man, admired by many women, but when she saw him on this summer day, the years seemed to roll back and he looked very much as he had that first day, protesting his worth over his brother Titus. He walked up and down by the pool emphasizing his complaint with violently waving arms.

The man to whom he protested was his father. Vespasian appeared either bored or very tired as he sprawled in the cerule chair placed close to the waters, his powerful, stocky limbs stretched out on the black-and-white mosaic around the edge of the pool. Vespasian saw Lysandra first, and his furrowed expression brightened a little, but quickly changed to his natural scowl.

"Lady Lysandra. I suppose you are leaving Rome today."

Domitian swung around, surprised at his father's unfriendly greeting but pleased to see Lysandra, who answered the emperor while acknowledging his rank with a slight inclination of the head.

"Yes, Caesar." She smiled faintly to show him she understood his concern. "I understood your daughter's husband is returning to Rome."

"Just so. Just so. You are a woman of your word. I wish things had been otherwise and you might have had what you wanted." He squinted at her, but not unkindly. "I thank you for the Pompeian wine you sent. It is excellent. Made from your own grapes, I understand."

"More my caretaker's doing than mine, excellency. He and his workers are very skilled. The land had gone to waste for so long."

He agreed readily enough that it was his daughter's fault. "She never liked country society. She is a product of the city."

"Pompeii is quite a city now," she reminded him. "Some thirty thousand, I am told."

Domitian laughed. "Too provincial for Ancaris. when I was a child I remember her wedding to Max and how angry she was when he wanted her to make their home in Pompeii. The home of his ancestors, he said in that pompous way of his."

Always defensive about his bastard daughter, Vespasian reminded him, "Nevertheless, Ancaris saw to it that Max's son was born in his father's house."

Lysandra repeated just above a whisper, "Max's son?" and remembered her dead father.

But the emperor snapped, "Flavius Claudius, the union of his house and ours."

Domitian looked at Lysandra. She didn't like his smile or the obvious implication that everyone knew and no one would admit the truth aloud. Angry and resentful, she used the emperor's earlier remark as an excuse to leave.

"As you say, Caesar, the Palatine will be full of company tomorrow. I must be on my way out of the city. I have my vineyards and my farm to see to."

But Vespasian waved her to his seat as he got up. "Stay with my son for a little while. Seduce him out of these jealous fancies. He is a good lad. But he persists in thinking he is the equal of his brother."

"I *am* his equal. And his better!" Domitian insisted, leaping across the corner of the pool after his father.

Startled by the suddenness of his son's action, Vespasian wavered as if attacked by vertigo. He reached out vainly for support. His powerful frame doubled over and he grimaced in pain. Domitian caught him before he could plunge backward into the pool, and Lysandra was beside him a moment later. Domitian was frantic.

"Father! Are you ill? What is it? You look like the Furies were at you." Whitefaced with fear, he asked Lysandra, "Is he dying? He mustn't die. Father!"

Vespasian bit his heavy lips until the pain subsided as Lysandra, who had little enough experience with internal ills, took a napkin from the nearest table, soaked it in the pool, and applied it to his head.

"No, no. My side," the sick man protested.

Domitian ripped aside his father's belt and tunic. With nervous fingers Lysandra transferred the napkin to Vespasian's hairy abdomen. But the pain subsided rapidly, and the old man motioned. "Cover me."

Carefully, Lysandra looked away, realizing that it was not wise to embarrass the emperor of Rome. At Vespasian's fierce, laconic instruction, Domitian got him to his feet again and the emperor seemed his old self once more. He muttered almost to himself, "Titus should be here. He mustn't leave Rome again."

Domitian, who had gone through one shock, now felt this second blow and cried on a note of hysteria, "Why shouldn't he leave, Father? He has his own armies. Do you think he will wait for you to die? He has made his plans. At the first

sign of weakness in you he will march back and take your throne."

"Domitian! That will do." Even after a seizure, Vespasian's rough note of command had not left him.

"It's true, Father. He means to bring back the three Syrian legions."

"You lie!" For an instant Lysandra thought with dread that the emperor would strike his son.

"Ancaris heard him instructing his centurion."

Vespasian lowered his fist. As always, the name of his daughter affected him. He took a few steps away, ignoring his son's helping hand. Then his great head lowered and he muttered without looking at Domitian or Lysandra, "I don't believe it. She's mistaken. She misunderstood." He took another step, more firmly, as he explained to his own satisfaction, "Being a woman, she failed to understand military orders. Enough, now. I am going out of the city to the cold-water baths in the hills. They always restore me."

"But Father," Domitian persisted, though Lysandra tried to hold him back, "Titus is under the influence of the Judean queen. She wants to be empress of Rome. It is she who is back of it. Titus can't think for himself anymore."

The great, brass-studded double doors opened for Vespasian to pass through, and two of his Praetorians stood waiting to escort him. He hesitated. Then, still without looking back, he waved aside Domitian's last desperate throw of the dice and went out.

Domitian was behaving so like a child, Lysandra couldn't help scolding him sharply. "You know none of that is true about General Titus. How can you tell such lies?"

With an effort Domitian calmed himself. She had taken his arm, and he gazed at her hand, then placed his other hand over it. "Your flesh is warm, Sandra, and your fingers are shaking. You must care very much what happens to me. Otherwise you wouldn't dare to interfere between me and my father."

She saw that his mercurial mood had changed, and she didn't like the light of anger and growing desire she saw in his eyes. She tried to back away, to resume her distance from him.

"My lord, I care about your family. About you and your brother, who is my friend."

His smile showed his lower teeth. The hatred he felt for his brother and the argument with his father had fed all his taste

for violence and cruelty. In spite of his good looks, there was an unpleasantly salacious aura about him. He did not usually show this deep, pathological hatred to her on those infrequent occasions when she had permitted his lovemaking.

"Sandra, lie down upon the floor there, beside the pool."

She hardly understood him for a moment. "Don't give me orders, my lord. I am no longer your property."

"Lie down!"

For the first time she felt something deeper than indignation. She was genuinely afraid of him.

Chapter Two

She tried to treat his mood lightly, with common sense. "Someone may come to get you for that banquet you are giving with Daphne."

He had both her wrists now, but she tried to remain calm, not to feed that cruel streak of his.

"No. They won't," he assured her. "My door monitor knows better than to interrupt me when I am in here with a female."

She laughed, on a high note that didn't sound like her. "But the marble is cold."

"I'll warm you." He waited no longer but pulled her to him, picked her up struggling and furious, and managed to drop her down just where he had indicated, so close to the pool that her hand dipped into the water as she reached out to keep herself from falling in. He went down on top of her, still showing unexpected strength as he pinned her to the floor.

"Raise your hips!" he commanded, and when she did not, he brought his knee hard against her stomach so that she gasped for breath. One hand pushed her stola and undershift up over her breasts, and she was aware of the cool nakedness of her groin. With all the pent-up anger and frustration that remained from his quarrel with his father, Domitian pierced her body with his last demonstration of his own power and masculinity.

"Am I stronger than Max?" he demanded wildly, and clung within her, driving and pounding while she heard herself groan and then cry out the desperate lie, "Yes, yes. Let me go!"

Her cry restored him to his senses. He drew back, freed her, and stared down at her, sweating, as he gloated, "You meant that, didn't you?" He reached out to touch the tiny mole high on the inside of her thigh. "They call those love marks. Did Max ever kiss you there?"

She remembered too well how Max had kissed her there, and his tenderness and sensuous touch made Domitian's forcefulness all the more loathsome. "Let me go, my lord. You are not yourself."

"Oh, yes, I am. I've finally got the better of Max, and that's almost as good as winning over Titus." He offered to help her up, but she avoided his hand, scrambling to pull herself together and restore some kind of order to her clothing. He watched her, a little of his confidence ebbing. Still, he boasted, "I'm going to be emperor, and then you'll see I'm better than Titus! You leave it to Ancaris. She'll make Father know the truth. He almost did today."

She paid no attention to him. Her body ached, though no permanent damage seemed to be done. Probably Domitian wasn't used to taking women by force. They came to him too easily. But she never would be able to let him love her again. This contemptible and disgusting act had cured her of any feeling for him but pity.

He gave her palla to her, tried to drape it around her head and shoulders, but she took it from his hands and arranged it herself. He licked his lips, fought a mental fight with himself, and pleaded finally, "Don't go, Sandra. I won't try that again. Stay for Daphne's banquet."

"I cannot. I gave your father my word."

"I suppose you will have Titus and that Jewess down to Pompeii as usual, so they can make love in privacy, and probably plot to bring down the empire."

"The guests I invite to my house are my own affair, my lord."

"If they bring Max, I'll find out. Wait and see. And Ancaris will destroy him with Titus. All she has to do is keep at Father about those armies who owe allegiance to my beloved brother. Father knows that men who have the allegiance of armies often become emperors."

"Farewell, my lord."

He did not stop her. But as she passed through one chamber of the palace after another, her mind and body, which had been seared with the memory of Domitian's lustful satisfaction, gradually recovered. She found new and greater worries to trouble her. Would Titus and Maximian know the danger they faced? They should be warned of the plot between Ancaris and her impressionable young brother.

She passed Daphne's quarters, debating whether she had time to warn General Titus. She followed the north corridor

to the older, less elaborate sector of the palace where Augustus and Tiberius and the earlier Caesars had lived half a century ago. Queen Berenice, for whom Titus had bought a handsome mansion on the Caelian Hill, preferred to stay on the Palatine, "where royalty resided" as she explained. But it was nearing sunset, and Lysandra hurried. Maximian, who traveled with imperial speed, might arrive in the night. She had to be out of the palace before there was any risk of meeting him.

She couldn't forget the one time she had seen him, when he walked out of the audience chamber as she entered. There was no peace between them yet, and she had no reason to believe another meeting would revive the love that the emperor had apparently killed.

The truth is, she admitted to herself, I'm a coward. I can't bear to go through the anguish of losing him again. I don't want to know what he thinks of me now.

There was no way to mistake the queen's apartments. The double doors into the entrance hall were open. The two Nubians stood impassively outside the doors. From within came the pleasant hum of voices and the clink of silver wine cups against a marble or citrus-wood table. She thought that Queen Berenice must be entertaining at dinner in her triclinium and hesitated, but a female asked from within the room, "Who is there?" and Lysandra entered. The slave was not the Egyptian, the queen's nurse, but a pretty woman of mature years, probably well over twenty. She bowed Lysandra into the entrance hall. This must be the woman who had captured General Max's fancy more than a year ago. She was sweet-faced, brown-eyed, brown-haired, and did not seem to resemble either Max's blond wife or Lysandra, his ex-mistress. Perhaps he had hoped to escape old memories.

In the small, formal triclinium Berenice and General Titus looked up from the couch they shared as they lay leaning on their left elbows and eating the olives, radishes, eggs, and oysters of their first course. They both welcomed Lysandra with genuine pleasure, Titus even getting up and ordering their guest to join them on the big couch, which held three diners cozily. She pleaded that she had to return to Claudia Acté's house before darkness. But she joined them on the couch, hurrying to explain.

"Excellency, there is something troubling me that I heard between your brother and the emperor."

Titus laughed and nudged the queen, who smiled indulgently, excusing her brother-in-law.

"The Lord Domitian is young and ambitious. He likes to boast."

"Excuse me, majesty, but this seemed more than just boasting. And the prime instigator is his sister."

"Ah! The fair Ancaris." Titus nodded. "If she were a man, we might all tremble." He was a tough, hard soldier but retained the humor that softened the legion commander's surface.

Berenice reached across her lover's body and reminded Lysandra, "You have reason to dislike the woman. She behaved to you with great cruelty. But I have always thought she was motivated by love for Max."

Annoyed by an expressed sympathy for her deadly rival, Lysandra said in her sharpest voice, "Nothing could be less likely. The woman has hated him from the day of their marriage. They had nothing in common."

Titus and Berenice looked at each other. Titus was inclined to agree with her, but Berenice, with a woman's intuition, could not be argued out of her conviction.

"Though, as Titus says, she can do nothing. Even Empress Agrippina lost when her son Nero chose to claim his powers. And poor Ancaris is no empress."

"She is constantly telling the emperor that your excellency intends to take over Rome with Max's—and your—three Syrian legions."

Titus signaled to a slave for more wine. "That delicious Pompeiian vintage of yours. I must give some to Max when he arrives. See if he can recognize the grapes he once owned."

"I must go." Lysandra stirred, started to get up, but Titus stretched out his arm. "My father has gone to his villa in the hills. Even if you and Max should meet, the empire would not collapse. Father couldn't very well take your freedom from you after all this time. He works within the law."

She thought ironically about Vespasian's threat to destroy the career of his favorite general. Then she banished the old bitterness to get closer to Titus' real danger.

"Excellency, your sister is using the queen as a weapon against you." She felt the hardening of the general's body and knew Berenice shared his tension, but she persisted. "I myself heard Domitian claim that Queen Berenice wants to be

empress of Rome, and for that reason, you will take the empire from your father."

"But it is a lie!" Berenice protested. She had paled at the news, knowing from the experience of Queen Cleopatra long ago how dangerous and believable such an accusation could be.

Caught between two anxious women, Titus persisted in ridiculing the danger. "I know my father. No one is stronger. He has heard Ancaris and Domitian all their lives and ignored their jealousy."

"But he is not strong, now," Lysandra protested. "I saw him have a seizure. A pain in his stomach or his abdomen. I believe he is ill; and if he is, then he may come to believe anything."

Berenice sat up with a cry. "Are they poisoning him?"

Both Titus and Lysandra hurriedly scouted such an idea, Titus through family loyalty, and Lysandra because she had seen Domitian's panic at his father's illness. Vespasian's death would certainly not help Domitian or Ancaris at this time.

She put in hurriedly, "No, surely not. They want him alive. There was no hint of such a thing. If there had been, Domitian would have accused his brother."

"Very true. Father isn't a young man. He lives frugally, the gods know! But he has had these pains before. Just left of his belly. And they've never done him any harm. I have the same pain sometimes when I take cold baths, and Father spends half his life in those cold-bath pools near the farm where he was born."

Lysandra got up from the couch, still unsatisfied. Titus was either too unsuspicious or too confident to believe her. She had done her best, and now it was past sunset. It would be long after nightfall by the time her litter reached Acté's house.

Both Titus and Berenice expressed their thanks, and Titus added, holding her hand a minute longer, "Max understands why you chose your freedom. It was the natural choice."

"Freedom must always be first," Berenice added.

Her sincerity was unquestionable, yet Lysandra wondered if the queen ever thought of freedom in regard to her own embittered people.

Still, it annoyed Lysandra that they should cling to the idea that she had broken off with Max to regain her freedom. She wondered if they had ever known the truth. Had Max told Titus that Vespasian would have destroyed his army career?

Approaching it now obliquely, she confessed, "I never understood how General Maximian could serve the emperor with the same devotion after being threatened with the ruin of his life's career. There was little choice, I suppose."

"The imperator knows best," Titus reminded her lightly. Then, after a moment of confusion, he understood her. "Was that how Father persuaded you? Threatened to ruin Max? Why, the old fox! I always wondered. Max believes to this day that Father used your freedom and that property to persuade you."

Lysandra was still untangling this news when Queen Berenice, even more confused, blurted out, "Maximian never said a word about his own career. I don't think he ever knew it was at stake."

"Why should he?" Titus exclaimed incautiously. "Do you think Father was a fool? He would never sacrifice Max, no matter how many mistresses he had. The threat was for poor Lysandra's benefit. And to this day Max has never known the truth."

Queen Berenice took a half-eaten fig and threw it across the room, just missing the slave with a salver full of the meat, poultry, and vegetable courses.

"I will tell Maximian with great happiness. For the sake of our Lady Lysandra, who was injured on my behalf today."

Her head whirling, Lysandra could only thank the queen and wonder if she should remain here in the palace on the off chance that Maximian might arrive tonight. But her pride won. Max had believed the worst of her. He had made love to other women. It was even possible he no longer loved her. Let him decide what he felt without her presence to nag his memory.

She kissed the queen's hands, touched Titus' hand in respect, and started out of the triclinium in spite of the queen's plea for her to stay.

She was met in the doorway by the Lady Ancaris with Domitian. The latter colored and demanded, "What are you doing here? You will have to leave. Father won't like it."

As for Ancaris, she nodded sweetly to Lysandra. "She is just leaving, Domitian. Don't make a scene and detain her."

Titus welcomed his brother and sister with careless good nature as usual. Their manipulations had never troubled him. He regarded Domitian's jealousy as normal in a younger brother, and he had never considered Ancaris anything but a

good-looking by-blow of his father's who had been lucky enough to marry his best friend.

"Join us. Unlike you staid and proper denizens of the Palatine, we are not formal."

Titus clapped his hands for the slaves to prepare other couches to make the requisite three, but Domitian, taking instant offense, said, "You were invited to a banquet the Lady Daphne is offering in my quarters and here you are, eating alone!"

The queen tried to clear these murky waters. "Oh, forgive me! I had forgotten. How could I have done so? I imagine it must have been those attacks in the streets. They made the Lady Daphne's invitation quite fly out of my head. A misunderstanding, Ancaris. Mine was the fault, dear Domitian. Come and greet me, you handsome Roman!"

Domitian hesitated, glanced at Lysandra to see how she took this flattery, but Lysandra had stopped to ask Ancaris how much Flavius had grown in the last three months. In a fit of pique, Domitian saluted the queen in military fashion. She coaxed him to her side and he went, feeling a little better about himself.

Ancaris' sly smile vanished at Lysandra's question. Almost against her will, she replied with growing enthusiasm, demonstrating gracefully. "I swear, by Mother Juno herself, the boy has read every manuscript in the imperial library, including those tiresome histories written by Emperor Claudius. And he's grown the length of my hand in just a matter of weeks! You would not know him. That is . . ." She recalled the rival to whom she was speaking. "His father will not know him."

Lysandra pulled her palla over her head again, avoiding Domitian's persistent attempts to attract her by his loud praise of the queen.

"His father would know him anywhere. Farewell, Lady Ancaris. I was just leaving."

Ancaris waited, indecisive, but Lysandra's careful reminder of Flavius' parentage restored her normal malice. In the soft voice that always warned Lysandra of the serpent within, she called, "But do not run away, my lady. You wouldn't want to miss my husband. He's home again. You will want to congratulate my hero on his rescue of the Danube legions."

"You must congratulate him for me, Lady Ancaris. I am returning home tonight."

"To your little villa in Pompeii? I must say, I don't envy

you that wretched farm. But surely you can delay a few minutes."

Lysandra's back stiffened. She was within a step of the double doors when the Nubians shuffled aside and Maximian strode in calling cheerfully, "General! What's this about the emperor leaving town before I arrived? Is he trying to avoid—"

He saw Lysandra in his path.

His shock was obvious to them all. The watchful Ancaris, like everyone else, noted the slow pallor beneath his sunburned skin before he recovered himself, removed his helmet, and carefully placed it under his arm, giving him time to restore his self-possession before he greeted Lysandra. "Lady Lysandra, you are looking well."

She, at least, was better prepared for the meeting and was able to be especially gracious. "You are very kind. I believe the country air agrees with me."

He had recovered, and remembering all the old bitterness, followed her mention of the villa with the dagger-sharp comment, smoothly spoken, "I'm sure it does. I know how much your property means to you."

Very much aware of the sparkling Ancaris, Lysandra consoled herself with the comforting thought that he would be different when he knew how his beloved emperor had cheated him and her.

Titus took his cue at a nudge from Berenice. "One cup. All of us. Max, Father is off to the hills. My dear sister Ancaris, you can hardly refuse a drink to the good health of our father. Max, smile." The queen whispered something to him. He grinned. "You are among friends, Max. Better friends than you imagine. And the Lady Lysandra cannot refuse either. My father calls her a special favorite."

Lysandra could find no way of refusing. In different, challenging ways, she knew that Max and Ancaris and Domitian were watching her. She shrugged. There was no reason now for her to hurry out of Rome. But she resented the pressure placed upon her and remained as cool and reserved as she could be. She didn't want them to imagine she was upset by what seemed a deliberate effort of Ancaris to bring her and Max together at the most awkward time, and before an exceedingly talkative audience.

Titus himself poured wine, and after those first minutes the conversation became general. Lysandra was puzzled by Ancaris' effort to keep occupied with almost anyone but her hus-

band. It was impossible not to feel that she had some game to play, and her curious efforts kept Lysandra on her guard.

Maximian was even more confused, but he remained near Lysandra, and she admitted to herself, studying him, that he was a trifle older. The desert suns had burned his ruddy skin and added wrinkles near his eyes. She thought they enhanced his looks. He may have come close to insulting her, but she confessed to herself that if he had given her one word of encouragement she could have poured out her love with all the old passion. She found herself watching his mouth. Tender and warm with a sensitivity she would never forget, it drew her desire as it had the first time they had met long ago in far-off Lutetia.

Queen Berenice had called the attention of Ancaris and Domitian to the new wall paintings of dead and bloody game birds. Max found himself very close to Lysandra. She felt that he had not done so of his own volition.

"How have you been?" he asked finally.

"I followed old Bacchus' dream. Do you like the wine? It comes from the grapevines that belonged to your family."

For the first time he smiled. "I remember them. I used to steal grapes when I was young. Bacchus caught me more than once and gave me a good hard belt across the rear."

His smile gave her such hope she found herself tongue-tied and was fumbling for something moving to say in return. Before she could speak he asked her abruptly, "Are you happy?"

Shaken by the emotion in his voice, she confessed, "I might be."

He reached out. She thought he was going to take the cup from her hand. She offered it to him. He ignored it. She felt his fingers on hers and did not dare to look down or she would weep.

Ancaris' remark reached them suddenly with its tinkle of amusement. "All the same, Titus, you never did the proper thing. Imagine, wearing a military tunic instead of a proper gauze chiton at the dinner couch! All to show off those muscular legs, I suppose. Does he have any scars or other marks of interest, your majesty? As a boy, I remember he had several freckles across his thigh."

Queen Berenice was dumbfounded at this frankness. "To—to me, the general's scars are signs of bravery."

"In a man, yes. In a woman, how different! The tiniest scar or mole is called a beauty mark worthy of kisses. . . . What

did you tell me, Domitian, about some female you made love to, the one with the—you called it a love mark—very high on her left thigh?"

With no idea there was anything personal in her remark, Titus laughed good-naturedly, but Queen Berenice's smile was forced. She didn't approve such open talk between the sexes. Domitian said nothing. He was staring at Max and Lysandra.

From the moment Ancaris had mentioned "beauty marks," Lysandra became aware of a buzzing in her head. She wondered if she would commit the ultimate blunder of fainting and thus reveal to both her enemy and her onetime love how much she was affected by that sly remark.

Of them all, only Max, who knew Lysandra's body so well, seemed not to have heard. But Lysandra felt the slight start he gave as he noted the object of Domitian's stare, and his fingers slipped away from hers. He had understood.

Ancaris broke the awkward silence. "Max, my love, Flavius has been asking when you would come home and play trigon with him. You must let me take you to him before he sleeps. He is just two corridors from here."

Lysandra saw that Max was moving away from her. She thought, He will go with his wife because it gives him an excuse to leave me.

Not to be outdone, she spoke before Max could answer his wife. "And I too must be on my way. I have many things to do, and I leave for my home before dawn. Once more, farewell to you all."

She went out between the Nubians and walked rapidly down the ancient hall.

Chapter Three

Lysandra spent the time of her journey back to Pompeii hoping that every horseman galloping by would be Maximian. By the time she reached the walls of the Campanian city in which she had been so happy with Max and later learned contentment as a "farmer," she knew her dream of Max's forgiveness was dead. It didn't matter whether Titus and Berenice told him of Emperor Vespasian's trickery. He would remember her more recent crime. Domitian had been her lover.

When she entered through the stout front door of the Pompeian villa she told herself firmly, I was reasonably happy here alone. I can be contented again. But she knew it would take time for the recent sight of him to stop haunting her.

In the meantime her servants found her short-tempered, hard to please, and absentminded. The quiet Noriah burst into uncharacteristic tears at some injustice on Lysandra's part, and even old Bacchus called his mistress to task for her treatment. After brusque apologies all around, Lysandra reminded herself that she had permitted Domitian to make love to her in the past. She must have provoked him to attack her on the very day Maximian returned to Rome. Max's discovery that she had been unfaithful was her own fault. But the fact that she was to blame did not ease the pain.

She had arrived home on a warm summer morning, and within the next two days she heard gossip of new public attacks upon Queen Berenice in Rome. Sooner or later, she knew this hatred of Titus' mistress would spread to Titus himself and he might find Domitian the new popular favorite to succeed Emperor Vespasian. It was even possible that An-caris and Domitian were masterminding the attacks on the queen, both in the Senate and on the streets of Rome.

But Bacchus reminded her that their business was the vineyards, along with their vegetables, which flourished in the volcanic soil. Bacchus stood in the garden and saluted the

towering dark mass of Mt. Vesuvius on the horizon with the branch of an apple tree. "Good old lady! You may have been a terror when the world was young. But you've done us many a good turn since you calmed down."

Swathed in her oldest gown and a covering cloth across her body, Lysandra was out pulling up radishes and the little lettuce leaves for the midday dinner, but she looked up at Bacchus' words, saw the black mountain with its peak wreathed in clouds, and remarked, "I respect her. But don't make me like her." She knew the volcano was extinct. All studies had agreed on that. But she couldn't help connecting it in her mind with the earthquake the city had gone through while Max was recuperating. And that had been a mere push-and-shove compared with the earthquake the city had endured seventeen years ago. After all this time there were still private homes unrepaired and even part of the Forum and an amphitheater were unfinished. The quake of seventeen years ago had been a major disaster for Pompeii.

"I wonder if Vesuvius has anything to do with our earthquakes?" she asked aloud, hoping Bacchus would deny it.

"She's a big woman, our Vesuvius. Who knows what she hides under all those vine-colored slopes?" Seeing her concern, he changed the subject. "But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about, my lady. You know that amphora of wine you had me send to the emperor's villa near the cold springs of Aqua Cutiliae?"

She nodded, without much interest. She was thinking of the lies Vespasian had told her. All with good intentions, to protect his daughter's good name. At least he had never really intended to destroy Max's career. But he had destroyed Lysandra's happiness and perhaps Max's as well. She could still accept Vespasian as the finest emperor since Augustus, but she could no longer like him.

"What about the wine?"

"Well, young Lucipor, who delivered it, should have been back here by yesterday at the latest. I'm just wondering what delayed him."

"You don't think he's run away?"

"Not Lucipor. The boy adores you, my lady, ever since you gave him his freedom."

"What do you think has happened?" Then she remembered the difficulty single travelers often had with footpads, cut-throats, and escaped slaves while traveling through the Cam-

panian countryside. "Bacchus, is there any danger? What should we do?"

He considered, while making faces indicative of a parched throat. Clearly, he would soon be raiding the cellar jars. "If he's been murdered—"

"No!"

"No use in sending anyone. But if he's been detained, had an accident or the like, then we'd best send off two or three good lads to track him down."

"Do so immediately. I never dreamed he could be in danger."

Bacchus shook the apple branch at Vesuvius. "Don't you frown at me, old woman." To Lysandra he promised, "If we don't see him by tomorrow, I'll send three boys from the fields, well armed. I think we can trust them. You pleased them mightily when you freed Lucipor. Now they have high hopes."

Somewhat relieved, Lysandra walked back along the colonnade, trying not to dwell on the memories every spot evoked, but it was impossible to walk through Max's house without remembering a thousand moments they had shared in this villa. She went into the kitchen quarters with the first-course vegetables of her dinner and was regaled with talk by her excellent male cook, bought at a bargain from the estate of a bankrupt senator. Every few minutes he basted the pork and sea perch roasting over the charcoal, meanwhile preparing a basin of fruit that was a work of art.

Bacchus wandered in, having finished his inspection of the garden and vineyards, and started to open the trapdoor into the storage cellar. He saw the sardonic look pass between Lysandra and the cook and justified himself with the reminder. "Finished early, and that sun gave me a mighty thirst."

He was already in the cellar surrounded by his beloved wine amphoras when the entire villa rang with the pounding of a knout or a heavy fist on the street door. Lysandra jumped. The sounds conjured up memories of horror: the night Emperor Nero had died, the night soldiers had clattered through the Palace of Justice in Lutetia when she knew Max was leaving and Perseus her father was dead. Had soldiers come to arrest her? For what crime?

Minutes later she was furious to think she had been so easily frightened by young Lucipor. Not satisfied with having worried her and Bacchus only an hour ago, he now almost fell into the entrance hall. He was neither injured nor half

dead, except with excitement as he waved away Noriah, who had opened the door, and plunged toward Lysandra.

"My lady! Something strange is going on. I know you'd want to know. You being the friend of General Titus and all."

Her first reaction was annoyance. She supposed there had been some dispute about the wine. Knowing how much Titus liked it, she thought that as a joke he might have taken the amphora himself.

"Very well. Come along. Noriah, call someone to take care of the horse and cart."

The servants working with the farm produce seldom scraped their heavy sandal-boots over the exquisite floors of the entrance hall with its savage CAVE CANEM in mosaics. But on this day Lucipor had obviously forgotten all the household laws set down by Bacchus, and Lysandra, with growing uneasiness, did not press him on the matter.

Although Lucipor was three days late arriving home from the emperor's hillside villa, his condition was that of a man who had just driven a chariot and four to victory in the Circus Maximus. He was still breathless, and from glimpses Lysandra had gotten of his horse and cart they had gone the distance at breakneck speed.

Bacchus ambled into the peristyle garden, prepared to fortify the good-looking young ex-slave and himself with a cup of wine from the small jar under his arm. Lysandra ordered the boy to sit down beneath the big awning that stretched over the marble benches and the little Cupid fountain. Lucipor protested that it wasn't "fitting" but finally obeyed when his knees automatically gave out.

He was still sucking up long, noisy swallows of wine from the cup Bacchus offered him when Bacchus coaxed, "Come now. What delayed you? And what put this scare into you?"

Lucipor gazed plaintively at Lysandra over the lip of the cup. "I wouldn't delay. Not on your service, my lady."

"No, no. He doesn't mean that. But what happened?"

"They wouldn't admit me to the emperor. Not for three days. They have the emperor surrounded in his villa, my lady. He's very ill. Every day he takes the icy-water baths and then he becomes ill with griping in the—excuse me, my lady—the lower regions. And his daughter, the Lady Ancaris and her friend Lord Helios, won't let anyone visit his sickbed."

Lysandra felt the chill of those icy baths. "It isn't poison then?"

"No. Quite different, they say. On the last day I was there, he couldn't even get up and go to the Baths. They say he felt a little better after not taking that icy water, but one of his body-servants confided to me that it was too late. Some internal organs should have been removed and now they have erupted and poured vile humors through his body."

"You say Ancaris and Helios are with him. Does anyone think they have harmed him?"

"Contrariwise, my lady. They invite in every physician they can find in southern Italy, but none of his friends. They are desperate to keep him alive until they can persuade him to name young Domitian as his heir."

Lysandra thought this was the important clue. It all made sense now. Small wonder they allowed none of the emperor's friends or advisers near his bedside.

"How far have they convinced him?"

Lucipor was feeling better, and the wine gave him the courage to confess, "I listened. The third day I got to talking to his body-servant, and when he left me alone to go and fetch in two Babylonian physicians—"

"I know the kind."

"—I put my ear to the portieres and heard the Lady Ancaris talking to the emperor. She kept saying: 'Your loyal Titus is leaving Rome this week for Misenum and the imperial fleet. Don't you see? He tells everyone he is escorting his harlot queen back to Judea, but when he returns it will be with all his legions. He intends to march in here, surrounded and protected by treacherous Praetorians, and dethrone you. Perhaps worse.' Anyway, that was her meaning. She has a wicked tongue, that lady."

"What did Vespasian say?"

"He seemed to be tossing and turning. Kept asking for some of that good Pompeian wine. When the lady offered him some other wine, he drank and then said he didn't think General Titus would betray his own father. But, my lady, he sounded like he wasn't sure. They're wearing him down. I'd swear it by Hermes the Trickster. Before long they'll have him convinced."

"Then he didn't receive your wine, and he didn't see you."

"That's what it came to, almost. On the last day, they let me bring the amphora in and show it to him and tell him about it coming from you. But they wouldn't let me give him

any message about you. The lady came up and gave me a nudge with her finger. Hard. She said her father mustn't keep talking. He must sleep. So they pushed me clear out and wouldn't let me get back. That's when I said to myself I had to get home to you and tell you, so you could warn General Titus, because when he and the queen-lady were here in April, he was very good to me. Gave me a gold aureus when I delivered all that wine and fruit to him."

"I understand." She turned to Bacchus, who promptly finished off his own cup of wine. "How can we warn him? He and the queen have already sailed."

"Get to Rome maybe, and tell our own General Max."

"Can't." the boy put in positively, and then begged Lysandra's pardon. "Excuse me, my lady, but when I went through Rome I thought maybe General Max would listen, but he had gone to Misenum to see them off and discuss with the admiral whether they should send a trireme to the Hellespont to fight some pirates."

Lysandra began to realize how this might affect her personally. With Domitian as emperor and Ancaris behind him making many of his decisions, not only Rome but Lysandra, Max, and many others might be destroyed.

"We must do something. Maybe we could catch Max as he returns from Misenum."

At this, Lucipor interrupted brightly, "But you can tell General Titus himself at Misenum."

"What!"

He grinned. "I found out in Neapolis when I was coming through. That's why I've been a bit out of breath these last hours. The general's ship couldn't sail because Queen Berenice's household furniture hadn't arrived from Rome yet."

Lysandra slapped the wooden awning pole. "You should have told us at once. We've so little time. They may have sailed already."

Somewhat deflated after his moment of heroism, Lucipor assured her hurriedly, "They weren't yet planning to sail when I asked at Neapolis. Might not be for a day or two."

"Thank you, Lucipor. You may have saved the empire. Bacchus, I must hurry. Can I get to Misenum?"

"Take us time. Couple of days at the least. Even traveling day and night. But I always did want to race in the circus."

"No, Bacchus. You can't. You are too—"

"Old? It's the old dog follows the scent. You get ready, my

lady. I'll have the light travel wagon hitched. Our two best mares. They're quick and steady. No temper-tricks."

Lysandra did not refuse his offer. Normally, one horse was sufficient to draw the little closed wagon with its wheels rattling and bumping over the cobblestones. But this time she felt that her mission was worth any discomfort.

She mounted the box beside Bacchus, having borrowed the thin summer travel cloak belonging to the female kitchen slave, and letting her hair fall around her shoulders with no attempt at a fashionable coiffure. Bacchus gave the signal, perhaps made more enthusiastic by an extra swig of her favorite wine. They drove rapidly out of the city by the land gate to escape the midtown traffic around the Forum, the markets, and the downtown amphitheater, which was crowded with screaming partisans of the local gladiatorial school at this hour of the day.

Somewhat belatedly, Lysandra wondered if they might have notified the nearest military camp, whose couriers could reach the naval port faster, but Bacchus reminded her, "They serve Vespasian. Whatever message you sent with them might be considered an act of treason. You'd have to be sure they were friendly to General Titus."

She agreed, but was shaky with fear over the possibilities of Vespasian's death. "If it actually is true about his illness, Ancaris might persuade him of anything. Suppose we get to Titus and then he arrives too late at the emperor's villa."

"No need to borrow trouble, my lady. We don't know any of this yet. Old Vespasian hasn't died and he hasn't turned from Titus, last time we heard."

It was comforting to ride with someone who had lived through the reign of nine emperors and was still healthy and content with life.

They stopped to rest the horses late that day, and rented new horses at an imperial post house in the middle of the night. Unfortunately, there were maddening delays on the road to Misenum itself when they ran into repair crews and an officious decurion who demanded to see their imperial passes before letting them proceed. Since they had no passes, they were forced to detour, and after more changes of horses and a speed that would have done credit to a circus charioteer, they reached the harbor of Misenum in the middle of the second night.

The harbor sparkled with tiny lights. Lanterns flickered from the mainmasts and some from the prow and the

boarding ladders. The sails of several biremes awaited the dawn breeze, and the two banks of oars were at the ready. Lysandra knew there wasn't a minute to lose.

She whispered to Bacchus, who announced haughtily as they were stopped at the docks, "Urgent message from the emperor to General Titus. Signal to one of your boats, man, at once!"

Unfortunately, he was talking to the duumvir of the largest trireme in the harbor. The haughty commander of the fleet warned them, "Only authorized personnel permitted on board. We sail within the hour." Two sailors awaited him. Ignoring their helping hands, he stepped down to the longboat below the jetty and gave the signal, and the oarsmen lowered oars and shoved off toward the flagship with its eagle standards and the great Roman eagle on its mainmast.

"Maybe you chose the wrong mood," Lysandra suggested, trying not to show impatience. The delay certainly wasn't Bacchus' fault. Two more ships' officers strode along the wharf toward another longboat. Lysandra swung down from the cart. Bacchus reached out a hand to stop her, too late.

"No use with them. They're naval lads too."

"I know, but there's a boat coming into the jetty from that big trireme. There are two figures. The blond one has a legion uniform. I can see it shining in the prow light."

She started down the jetty steps, then stopped, peering across the dark waters. A minute later she groaned as she made out the profile of the blond soldier more clearly.

"It's Max's old comrade, Ilarion. Max ordered him out of the villa at Pompeii. He will never listen to me."

Bacchus, who was two steps above and behind her, didn't make matters any more encouraging by his agreement.

"I remember." Then he added, "We best tell him how important it is for General Max. He may believe us."

After their bad luck thus far, Lysandra had girded her loins for the greatest battle of all, to convince Ilarion, when the man behind him in the longboat climbed out of the boat like a landlubber and stopped at the stone landing, astonished to see Lysandra a few steps above him. Even in the blue-dark of night she knew Enobarbus' dear, rough face and called out to him, "Is Max still with General Titus? It's vitally important. I must talk to them at once."

Disturbed by Ilarion's sharp nudge, Enobarbus hesitated. "But San—Lady Lysandra, the galley will be putting out to sea in minutes. You can talk to Max when he comes ashore."

"No! Titus must return to Rome. There is a plot against him, and the emperor may be dying."

She heard Ilarion say contemptuously, "She is lying. The bitch would do anything to get back in the general's good graces."

His insult was enough for Enobarbus, who elbowed him aside with such a hard jolt the blond officer almost lost his balance.

"Come along, my lady. We'll get them in time."

As the good centurion helped her into the boat, Bacchus came puffing down behind her, adding his assurance. "It's true what she says, soldier. Our freedman reported the whole thing." He jumped into the scuppers, falling to his knees but scrambling up again to squeeze onto a thwart. At the last minute Ilarion got in too. Lysandra wondered if he intended to make more trouble, but she was too nervous to care, now that they were so close to the men who might save the empire if they arrived at Vespasian's bedside in time.

They hadn't come a minute too soon. Just as Lysandra was pulled up the ship's ladder she saw Max and General Titus in a last handclasp. At Titus' surprised exclamation Max's fingers slipped from his friend's wrist, and he looked around, seeing Lysandra, who had thrown back the hood of the slave's dark cloak. She couldn't mistake the gladness that shone in his eyes, a light that faded as Titus moved toward her, providing an explanation.

"Lysandra, you've come to see her majesty off. That was kind of you. You were always her friend. Perhaps the only one she had in Rome. . . . Hortator!" He called to a huge, hairy, half-naked man to go below where his hammer would beat the rhythmic time for the galley slaves. "Ask Queen Berenice to join us on deck."

The hortator disappeared into the bowels of the ship like an evil, grinning god of the underworld.

Lysandra clasped her hands, wanting both men to realize she had not come for social amenities.

"Excellency, you must return to Rome. I have reason to believe the emperor may be dying. Your enemies are with him. He may proclaim the Lord Domitian his successor."

While Titus argued, only half understanding, Max took Lysandra's arm, saying, "Come. You are shivering. You must have been drenched getting out here."

Any other time she would have been delighted by his

concern for her as a sign of his forgiveness, but this moment was too perilous.

"Never mind about me. Oh, Max, it's all true." And she explained a little more coherently than Bacchus just what young Lucipor had seen and heard.

Titus was harder to convince. "I know that wife of yours, Max, and I grant you she's capable of anything. But my little brother? Young Domitian loves me in his own way."

"Excellency, he is consumed by jealousy. He talks of nothing but how he ought to be his father's successor."

Max agreed with her. He kept his arm around her shoulders absentmindedly as if he had forgotten to remove it.

"General, you must get to the cold springs as fast as possible."

Titus finally agreed. "I had no notion he was so ill. Where is Berenice? Where is her majesty?"

"Here, Titus. I heard. We must return."

While Lysandra was getting up the courage to point out the queen's vulnerability, Bacchus bellowed, "Not the queen. The Lady Ancaris said the general was betraying his father for the queen's sake. Majesty, sorry, but they hate you in Rome. They don't want you back."

Titus had already started to the ladder. He put out his hand. Queen Berenice came to him.

"Don't believe it. They can't help loving you."

But she had seen Lysandra's face, the sad understanding in her eyes. Berenice stepped back, as if already conscious of the widening barrier between the queen of Judea and the man who might well be the emperor of Rome at this hour.

"No." Ignoring these witnesses, including half the ship's company, she added, "No, my dear lord. This ship sails on the morning tide for Caesarea. Farewell, and may the great God Jehovah be with you always."

Those nearest them turned away. Max was already at the ship's ladder, helping Lysandra over the side. Ilarion, feeling his master's eyes upon him, lifted Lysandra down into the bobbing longboat at the bottom of the ladder. Bacchus retreated clumsily, helped by Enobarbus. They did not see the final goodbyes between those two rulers of such different powers, East and West, but they sensed that if Titus became emperor, the parting must be forever.

Chapter Four

While Titus' spirited mount was being brought around from the local camp, the little knot of men made rapid plans on the dock, eyed curiously by those sailors and officers rushing to fill the boats and reach their ships at the last possible minute.

Titus sighed as he looked at Max and his ex-mistress, who remained close together. As Titus fastened his short military cape, he confessed to Lysandra, "I never told Max the truth. Berenice wanted me to, but I was afraid."

"Afraid?" Max repeated. He was puzzled but also sensed a guilt his friend was admitting, and he didn't like it. "What were you afraid of?"

Titus did not smile. He placed one hand on his friend's shoulder. "Of your loyalty. Now, don't puff up like an angry adder. You had reason to turn against my father, if you only knew it."

Lysandra's nervousness increased. Now that Max seemed to have forgiven her without knowing the full truth, she, like Titus, was afraid of his reaction if he discovered the trick played by a man he had served faithfully all his life. It might be better if Max never knew. She tried to indicate this to Titus, but too late.

Max snapped, "It was about the Lady Lysandra and me?"

Titus nodded, explaining lamely, "You must remember, Father has always been besotted about having a grandchild. Perhaps a future emperor. And if you divorced Ancaris all manner of stories about the child's parentage would be given credence. He had to separate you and the Lady Lysandra."

What irony, Lysandra thought—that my weak, non-Roman father might sire a future emperor of Rome!

Very slowly, and with a strength that made even the powerful Titus wince, Max removed his friend's arm from his shoulder.

"I knew he offered Lysandra her freedom. No one can

blame her. I was the selfish one. When he threatened never to let Ancaris free her, I said it was not necessary. We would remain together."

"Tell him," Titus commanded her. "Or I will. If I succeed my father, I want it without bargains and secrets. My father persuaded your mistress that you would be broken from the legion, driven from service to Rome. You would become an outcast if you divorced his daughter."

"But that is ridiculous." Max turned Lysandra around to face him. "Even if he threatened, Vespasian was no Caligula. Nor would my men have permitted it."

"I know that now," she said evenly. "But he was so reasonable. He was even kind."

Max agreed, heavy with sarcasm. "Yes. He was always reasonable. And kind. I used to admire those very qualities about him. I should have remembered, he always got what he wanted, eventually." Seeing her face in the late starlight, he folded her within his arms, smothering her against his breast and throat. She made no attempt to free herself. In spite of all the danger awaiting Titus and Max in Rome, she was happy.

Over her head, Max remarked to Titus, "No wonder you doubted my loyalty if I found out how wily he could be."

Titus' aide had brought around the big white charger, and the future emperor mounted quickly, leaning down to offer his hand.

"Are we still friends?"

Max stared at him while Titus and Lysandra held their breath. Then Max removed one arm from around Lysandra and took Titus' offered hand. "I may find it hard to forgive the man, but I swore to uphold the emperor. So rest easy. We are still your men. You will have to take a cohort with you."

"Exactly what my beloved sister hopes I'll do, to prove to my father that I am taking over the empire. I go alone, except for my aide, Secundus here."

Bacchus' chunky figure suddenly got in Titus' path. "They won't let you see him, excellency. Lucipor says he's well guarded. If you try, the physicians will ban you from his presence."

"I'll force my way."

"And have them say you killed your father by your behavior, excellency? Or give them the excuse to kill you?"

Titus frowned. "Can they be that serious?"

None of his officers believed it. They were all for bulling

his way through, but Max, watching the play of emotions over Lysandra's face, suggested, "Lysandra has some ideas. You know these conspirators better than we do. What would be your plan?"

She looked up eagerly at Titus' strong, set features.

"The emperor often calls for the Pompeiian wine we deliver. Let Bacchus and me offer to deliver an amphora as Lucipor did. You must be waiting near one of the doors, excellency, with the amphora. You might wear a slave's cloak and hood. Max and others to protect you will be within call if Helios and Max's wife try violence."

But Titus disliked anything that smelled of deceit. He waved away her idea with thanks.

"I hope that won't be necessary. Father and I never used trickery."

After a rueful glance at Lysandra, who shook her head, Max did not remind him of Vespasian's trickery that had separated the two lovers.

"Well then, may you go with the wings of Mercury! However, a few of my men and I will be close behind you."

"As you please, my friend. But no clanking armor, and no swords out. Ancaris is sure to be forewarned of trouble if she catches sight of you."

General Titus waved to them, returned the soldiers' salute, and galloped off along the waterfront toward the main highway.

"I am right," Lysandra insisted anxiously.

Somewhat to her surprise, Max agreed. "And my dear love, you may have to carry out that plan of yours. Delivering the wine. Barbus, how can we get Lysandra to Rome by the quickest means?"

In the end, chariots, horseback, and other methods were ruled out as impractical, and Enobarbus and Ilarion took Lysandra's own cart, harnessed two of the most rapid horses at the imperial post house, and set off at a breakneck pace for the capital leaving only Bacchus to return to Pompeii and his beloved grapevines.

After their first stop to change horses, with Max holding her close as if he expected a trick to make her disappear from his life again, she, being the more practical of the two, remarked, "I like him. Titus, I mean. But he is like all the world. Power comes first."

Max kissed the top of her head, murmuring in a sleepy, sensuous voice, "He isn't a bad sort. Why do you say that?"

"Because he didn't once express any feeling about the emperor's condition."

Max's face darkened. "Nor do I. When I think of the lies he told you!"

"But he has been a good ruler. When have we had a better one in our lifetime?"

He had no answer to that, and she pointed out, "I think he loves his father."

"He does."

"But he says nothing of the emperor's condition. Doesn't he care that his father may be dying?"

"In his own way. He also has a certain family feeling for his brother Domitian. But I suppose you can understand that very well."

"I detest the Lord Domitian." She saw that she had cheered him up considerably and felt in honor bound to add, "But I pity him too. I find his jealousy and ambition pathetic."

"I can understand that. But why do you detest him?"

She felt hot and flushed and said savagely, "Because he takes what is not his."

They sat together on the rough couch at the imperial post house, and Max hugged her to him. She felt that whatever happened in future, the tragedies, the losses, the horrors, at least, they had this hour, and she wanted time to stop, so that life would never move onward. She and Max might stay here in each other's arms forever, to make up for long days and nights, the years when they had been separated.

But the great white temples and basilicas of Rome appeared on the horizon all too soon, and they had to make plans. At the Palatine, Daphne herself met them in one of the pillared corridors to complain that the Lord Domitian had deserted her.

"My dear Lysandra, go and fetch him back. He hates being around sick people."

"Then the emperor is still alive," Max put in. "The gods be thanked. "Barbus, Ilarion, we go on at once."

Daphne called after them, "No use you soldiers going, my lord. Even General Titus can't get in to see him. One of the Praetorians came back to get young Flavius. They thought the boy might cheer up the emperor. And the Praetorian said the emperor was afraid of soldiers. He thinks General Titus will steal the empire. That's what the Praetorian said."

Max put in, "That's the work of Ancaris. We haven't a

minute to lose. My love, do you remember your plan? It looks as though we may have to depend on one slender woman to choose the next emperor. And I don't mean Ancaris."

Titus instead of Domitian. Lysandra had few doubts. She knew Domitian's envy and jealousy, his emotional outbursts, his constant concern for personal glory. Titus was the natural heir, a man who had spent his life serving Rome as his father had.

The hills with their rich foliage and sweet summer smells were a welcome change from the sultry stink and turmoil of the crowded city. But now that so much depended upon herself, Lysandra grew more and more tense while the horses climbed a narrow, seldom-traveled hill road toward the emperor's country villa. Max explained that they had a better chance of arriving unnoticed than if they came galloping up on the main road, which was much used nowadays by imperial couriers and visitors, including senators, from the capital.

They had one piece of luck. Almost at once they met Titus' aide, Secundus. There had been considerable excitement around the cold springs when the emperor, supposedly asleep, somehow managed to get out of bed and walk to the cold springs wrapped only in a cape forgotten by his son Domitian. There were such recriminations from Ancaris before she and Helios got her father back to bed that, as Secundus remarked sourly, "You'd think she was empress of Rome instead of a bastard daughter—your pardon, excellency."

Max said, "Not at all. I agree. Then General Titus hasn't been able to see his father yet?"

"No, excellency. As soon as he heard the emperor was at the cold baths, he hurried there, but Ancaris had already got the old man—I mean the emperor—back to bed, and six Praetorians guard the two doors of the imperial apartment, the visitors' door and the servants' entrance. They've been promised money and lands by Ancaris in young Domitian's name."

Max's laugh had a grim edge. "She may have promised more than she can fulfill. All these precautions mean the emperor hasn't yet named Domitian as his successor. So we've still got time."

"How is the servants' entrance guarded?" Lysandra put in.

"Two Praetorians. They'll be changing at the sixth hour. Noon."

"When and where does Ancaris sleep?"

"She sleeps in the emperor's own sleeping apartment. She was up all night and this morning when she had to go after the emperor. I'd think she'd be asleep now. Or right soon. Domitian usually arrives to sit by his father along about the ninth hour in the afternoon."

Lysandra was remembering a night long ago when she had disguised herself as Daphne and sneaked past the guard in the Palace of Justice at Lutetia.

"Does Ancaris have a maid anywhere near my size and complexion?"

"There's one. A Syrian called Themis. Not so pretty as you, but her hair's long and black." Titus' aide caught his breath. "And one good thing. It was windy this morning and she wore a big desert-type headpiece. It might cover some of her face."

They were on a grassy-grown slope beyond the villa gardens, hidden from view by the back garden wall, and Max sent Secundus to bring General Titus without being seen.

"And tell him to borrow a slave's cloak and hood," Lysandra put in.

Within half an hour Titus, looking like a muscular slave and carrying an amphora on his shoulder, was on the slope to await Lysandra's orders. Secundus had brought the clothing belonging to the Syrian maid Themis.

"She's resting comfortably in a house down the hill," he explained to Lysandra's question. "She's decently covered. General gave her his military cape. And he's found half a dozen Praetorians loyal to General Titus. They're waiting for our signal when the general is named the next Caesar."

Titus was to follow Lysandra as a slave doing her bidding. Max and Secundus would assail the front at the emperor's word. Enobarbus and Ilarion would wait on the grassy hillside for the signal, and in the ensuing shouts—perhaps the emperor's own command—Ancaris' Praetorians would realize they had backed the wrong horse.

Everything was predicated upon the belief of Titus' friends that the emperor still intended to name his elder son as his successor. Though the Senate had the final power, no one doubted that the august body would endorse Vespasian's candidate.

Lysandra breathed deeply, squared her shoulders, and received a kiss from Max.

"May the goddess Fortuna go with you, my love."

She smiled. "With us all, darling."

Titus tapped her shoulder lightly. "Slump over. Our Syrian friend is anything but straight-backed."

Lysandra huddled down a little and pulled the stiff headcloth closer around her face, grateful for the brisk wind that helped to shroud her identity. She would like to have gone forward with her head up. It might have given her more confidence.

Things looked better, however, when, closely followed by Titus balancing the amphora, she carried a basin of apples and grapes to the garden gates, swaying her hips and trying to nudge her way between the two tall, shining Praetorians. One of them reached for an apple. She slapped his hand, moving inside the gateway all the while and letting the other soldier steal a stem of grapes without appearing to notice him. The first called to Titus to halt. At almost the same second she ordered Titus in a heavily accented voice, "Do come along! You know our lady does not like dawdlers." She gave a twist of her hips just as the two other Praetorians came up to relieve their comrades, and they were all too busy to tease her or stop the obviously halfwitted country bumpkin who followed her. Titus seemed to enjoy acting like a splay-footed fellow tripping over everything in his path.

They entered the villa, passing the kitchen, where slaves moved about preparing the afternoon meal. No one paid any attention to them until Lysandra noted with a chill of fear that Helios, the eunuch, was in the kitchen as well, waiting for a silver tray to be loaded.

Lysandra got safely by the doorway, but Helios glanced over the shadowy passage when Titus went past with the amphora. Fortunately, at the last second Titus had switched the big jar to his left shoulder and concealed his profile from Helios' sharp eyes. Suddenly a door loomed up in Lysandra's way. She tried not to be surprised. She sensed that Helios might have stepped to the kitchen doorway to watch her, in which case he could see that she was confused by the door. She pushed the bolt with assumed confidence and barely missed the lizard-eyed Zostra, who had been about to leave.

They stared at each other during the time it took Titus to step in, raise his free hand, do something to the side of the old woman's neck. The blow was so swift it appeared that Zostra simply dropped against Titus. He still held the amphora but managed to edge her into the unusual high-backed chair that must be there for the emperor's use when he felt

able to sit up. Meanwhile, his entire action had been accomplished without a sound beyond a single gasp from the old woman.

Lysandra was surprised to find no one else in the Spartan-simple apartment, but there was an arras across the room with portieres and obviously led to the emperor's small chamber. He was a careful man with money, and these settings must be his choice. Titus motioned Lysandra on. Hoping for the best, she stepped between the green velvet curtains.

For Lysandra, the room was dark at first, the shutters fastened over the window embrasure and only a dim wick glowing in a lamp boat at the far end of the room. She squinted, trying to make out the figures of Emperor Vespasian and his daughter, both of whom must be asleep, since Lysandra couldn't make out any movement, though she heard heavy, stertorous breathing from the opposite side of the room. Unnerved, she sensed a movement beside her without actually hearing anything.

She turned her head at the same time that the flat of a steel blade chilled her throat. She coughed. Close beside her, Ancaris whispered, "Do you think I am dead to what goes on? I know why you are here. You want to warn him that Titus is waiting to see him. Set the basin down. Silently."

Lysandra obeyed while trying to get her voice out, hoping the sick Vespasian would hear, but he still breathed with an effort, now and then groaning, and then seemed to breathe quietly as he turned over. Meanwhile, the blade of Ancaris' meat knife cut off her voice.

She choked, whispered hoarsely, "Caesar has a right to see his older son. Vespasian is emperor. Not you." The knife pressed harder. Instead of intimidating her, it only made her angry, her voice more hoarse, carrying farther into the room. "What are you afraid of, my lady? Titus loves his father. He came only to see the emperor. He has one official aide in all of these hills. And your—husband—is here with two comrades. Is this the army with which you threaten the emperor?"

"Out of here. You will disturb my father." Ancaris began to push her between the curtains. Lysandra proved unexpectedly stubborn. Then everything happened at once. The wine amphora dropped and rolled across the floor of the antechamber. The knife slipped from Lysandra's neck and Ancaris made strangling, gurgling noises in the grip of her half brother.

"Lysandra, try to rouse my father. Ask if he will see me. If

he is too ill, I'll simply sit by him. We never had much to say anyway, but we understand each other."

Shaking with both nervousness and hope, Lysandra was about to obey when a rough, querulous voice that excited them all bellowed through the room.

"Come and sit. Stop making so much noise about it!"

Titus grinned over Ancaris' wild, feline eyes. "That'll be my father. Here's your knife, Ancaris. But I don't advise you to use it."

While Ancaris swayed, not even trying to pick up the knife, Lysandra stepped inside the emperor's chamber again, lighting another wick in the swinging lamp. She watched Titus throw off the slave's robe as he strode to his father's side. He wore no sword or belt, simply a leather jerkin over a lightweight tunic. He was totally unarmed.

Vespasian tried to sit up, fell back, but offered his arm to his elder son.

"Dear boy, they said you'd come with a legion to depose me. . . . Didn't want to die in bed. Not at my son's hands, certainly."

For the first time Lysandra heard the choke of real emotion in Titus' voice as he knelt by his father's couch, holding out both hands to show he was unarmed.

"Father, I'm here to obey you. Give me your commands."

Vespasian patted his bowed head. "I know. I always knew. I held out." He glanced across the room at Ancaris, who stood, pale and ghostlike, in the curtained arras to the antechamber. With an effort that made him wince, Vespasian smiled.

"Ancaris, if you love me, call in the guards. So they may swear allegiance to my successor."

Expressionless, she said, "Yes, Father," and went to the visitors' entrance of the room. She signaled with her forefinger. Several uniformed men, their breast armor shining, trooped into the room, herded in by Max, who carried no weapon and like Titus wore a simple tunic. The Praetorians glanced at Ancaris and then, with one accord, their heads shifted to the man on the couch.

Vespasian moved his arm and with difficulty rested it on the broad back of his kneeling son. He grinned faintly at Max, who saluted him: "Hail, Vespasian! May the gods give you good health. We need you."

"Rome needs you," Titus corrected his friend.

But Vespasian's fingers fluttered on Titus' shoulder, waving away such military compliments.

"I've known my time is come. Favor me, comrades. Hail the new Caesar. Emperor Titus."

Enobarbus and Ilarion moved between the curtains just behind Ancaris and Lysandra. They held the furious, struggling Helios between them, then knelt with Helios to salute the two emperors, father and son. They took up the cry for the new emperor, and shook Helios, who repeated the cry in a low voice. Lysandra felt the tension in Ancaris' slender form as her brother Domitian, hearing the cry from half a dozen husky men, came in past the Praetorians. He went directly to Ancaris.

"I couldn't help it. The village is going mad. They want Titus."

"I know, my dear. I heard. But your time will come. Sooner than he thinks."

Lysandra pretended to watch the two emperors, but she listened to Ancaris, wondering.

The golden woman said a cryptic aside to Helios, "How alike they are, father and Titus! How fond of good wine! I must remember that." Helios pretended not to hear her. He was trying to pretend he had always been on Titus' side.

"Son!" Vespasian called suddenly.

For a few seconds Domitian didn't realize it was he who was being summoned. Even Ancaris merely stared, in a daze. But Lysandra nudged him, and he fell to his knees beside his brother. Vespasian's hand moved from Titus to Domitian's dark head.

"Be loyal, my dear boy, and your time will come."

To everyone's surprise, Domitian's cheeks were wet with tears. He cried brokenly, "You do love me, Father. Ancaris, I knew he loved me too!"

At the incredulous joy she heard in his voice, Lysandra felt the tears start in her own eyes.

Vespasian's hard face had the veined marble look of dead flesh, but his hand remained on Domitian's bowed head. Lysandra felt that the staunch old man was happy, even in his dying moments.

Chapter Five

(Anno Domini 79, August 24)

On the day of his acclamation by the Senate, Emperor Titus reminded Lady Lysandra, "You promised to invite me to one of your Pompeian dinners. On our return from the fleet inspection at Misenum we shall celebrate the Festival of the Divine Augustus in Pompeii with you and Max, and my family. Even young Flavius. I want to rebuild loyalties in my household. Then home toward Rome, just after noon, if possible."

Noting that his "family" included Ancaris, Lysandra doubted that he would ever gain the loyalty of his half sister, but she was willing to help in any way she could, particularly as he hadn't yet arranged for Max's divorce.

Max had returned to Pompeii with Lysandra and was busy being educated in viniculture by Bacchus, but she knew that this enjoyment with the life of the land would not last long. She wanted him to be happy, and in spite of their glorious hours together, she knew his only permanent life was with the legion.

Lysandra and Max spent a week preparing for the entertainment of the new emperor while old Bacchus promised an amphora of wine from his choicest grapes. Max suggested inviting their mutual friend Claudia Acté, but Lysandra knew it would be most unlikely, though she had sent a slave with an invitation to Acté, as always. But through the years the

kindly, charitable woman had grown more secretive, apparently devoting her time to her religion, among the strange, antisocial Christians and Jews. Lysandra stopped by her villa each time she visited Rome, but Acté, sweet and kind as always, seemed more and more remote, constantly talking about a hereafter. Lysandra was far more interested in a here, like most people of her world.

On this August morning when Lysandra and Max stood in the atrium waiting to greet the emperor, Max pulled her to him and would not let go. He looked at her in the old, dear way.

"Let Titus see us as the proper host and hostess of this house. It will remind him that I am to sue for divorce immediately. He promised me I was to return with him today and attend to the matter. . . . It's been a long, long time, *carissima*."

"We have each other. I'm afraid to ask for more. The gods will be jealous." She was still fearful of asking too much. Her past was witness to the fact that there could be no certainty.

The first of the processions came up the street. The doorkeeper looked out and summoned the boys to handle the horse. Most of the youths were borrowed from neighboring villas, and on this hot summer day they giggled, laughed, and teased each other at the fun they would have riding or leading the horses around to the stables.

Lysandra looked out. "It's Ancaris' litter. A man is riding beside it."

"Trust her to come along when there's something to be gained," Max remarked without enthusiasm. "If she thinks she will talk Titus into hindering the divorce, she can think again."

But already Lysandra had seen young Flavius jump out of his mother's litter and run along from steppingstone to steppingstone holding out his arms to Lysandra.

"I've come to see you, Lady Sandra. I'm to eat with you if you let me. And drink wine with you."

"Yes, indeed, young lord, to the dinner. But your wine will be watered, as for any boy your age." She was out in the street, holding out her own arms. How like Perseus he was! Darkly charming, winning all hearts. Life was easy for someone so richly endowed. She found the idea poignant, and because of this secret feeling she was anxious to be especially kind to him. Even Max found him appealing and joined Lysandra on the street to welcome him. In a few years the

child, now leggy and handsome, would be old enough to put away his childhood toys and the good-luck bulla he wore around his neck, and be permitted to wear the toga of manhood. It would be a sad day for Lysandra, who suspected Ancaris would keep him well away from her husband's second wife.

The day was warm enough so the boy had worked up a sweat when he went into Lysandra's arms. After a good, strong embrace unimpeded by Ancaris, who was being helped out of her litter by the eunuch Helios, the boy put his hand up and in his friendly way sought Max's hand. They clasped fingers in a very grown-up way, and Lysandra could see that Max had begun to enjoy the boy's natural charm.

Flavius then took Lysandra's hand and complained, "it's hotter here than Rome. Mother said it would be cooler."

"It usually is." Max glanced up at the slopes of the hovering mountain that rose beyond the city limits. "Those clouds over Vesuvius will break this afternoon, and then there ought to be rain."

Lysandra studied the mountain's dark contours. "It's very dark up there. It almost blots out the sunlight."

"No danger of that," Max assured her. "I've seen it look like that before."

But she had never liked the mountain, extinct or not. Perhaps old Bacchus' superstitions had gotten into her. She began to see it as an evil, puffing goddess whose belly rumbled every once in a while, producing earthquakes. Lysandra devoutly hoped there would be no earthquake today, with the villa full of imperial guests.

The sultry morning set all the servants' tempers on edge, and there had been trouble in the kitchen. But Lysandra loved to watch the ease with which Max, in his crisp but good-mannered military way, settled these small disputes.

Lysandra had been anxious about a social meeting between Ancaris and the man who was still her husband, but the moment passed with surprising lack of interest on the part of either party. Max remarked sardonically, "I wondered what it would take to get you down to Pompeii. Doubtless you hoped to profit by the emperor's visit."

"How can you say such a thing? Titus asked me particularly to come. Perhaps he wants me to have an amphora of that famous wine of yours. May I? Helios will oblige me by fetching it to my travel cart."

Surprised, Lysandra said, "Certainly. Old Bacchus will help

him. But I suggest you keep Helios out of the emperor's way. The emperor knows how hard Helios worked to keep him from seeing the late Emperor Vespasian."

"Can I have wine without water?" Flavius asked. "Please?" He pulled on Ancaris' sleeve. She smiled absently, said, "Maybe. Later. When you are older. Now go and play in the garden."

Lysandra expected her to try to gain Max's help as an escort through the house. It would only be a plan to separate Lysandra and Max for a few hours. But the woman made no such effort. She seemed preoccupied. Lysandra wondered what was on her mind, but couldn't stay to find out.

"Excuse me. The emperor is arriving."

Max said, "I'll go with you and see that he's comfortable. He hates being fussed over."

Though some might have found this a distinct rebuff, Ancaris wandered into the villa, motioning Helios to follow her. The eunuch bowed low to his host and hostess, then went obediently after the only person on the Palatine who still found him useful. He had survived the falls of Nero, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, but his actions against Titus had ruined any chance he might have had of surviving in power after Vespasian's death.

Max took Lysandra's arm and walked out to the street with her. "What in Tartarus is that eunuch doing in the kitchen area?" he asked of the hot, still August sky overhead.

"Getting a free amphora of wine, I imagine." She didn't care. She found it flattering that Ancaris had actually decided to try the wine of the house, undoubtedly because her brother, the emperor, preferred it. Like Helios, she probably was working her way back into Titus' good graces. Titus did not hold grudges. In Jerusalem, scene of his most celebrated victory, he had attempted to prevent the carnage and destruction in which even the soldiers loyal to King Agrippa and his sister, Queen Berenice, had joined so wholeheartedly.

Titus rode up to his host and hostess, remarked on the unusual stifling air, and dismounted, turning his horse over to an aide and clapping Max on the back.

"Well, my friend, today's the day. When we leave Pompeii you go with me. No dawdling on the way. A few hours' sleep. A solid meal. And when we reach Rome you may go through this divorce business. There's nothing to it, they say."

While Max hugged Lysandra, murmuring, "I knew it

would be soon," the emperor crooked his knuckle under Lysandra's chin.

"Don't look so worried, *carissima*. I've given my word."

"I never doubted that, Caesar. It's only that I can't help thinking how angry and dangerous your sister will be." Then she saw the slim, scowling young man who had accompanied the emperor and was now giving over his mount to two neighbor boys for food and a rubdown. "And I'm afraid your brother Domitian too will be angry."

But Titus' confidence was contagious. "I promise you on the word of Caesar, before this day is over, my brother and my sister will be hailing me louder than anyone. And Max's little divorce won't be worth a copper to them."

Lysandra had no idea what he planned, but it was obvious that Max believed him, and Max knew him better than she did. Of course, Max had known Vespasian better too, and she had been right about him.

She tried to get over that bleak fear of troubles ahead, a fear born in her that night at Lutetia when she had found her father's greed and stupidity had enslaved her to Rome.

Before the midday dinner Titus insisted on one of those cold baths that had been the death of his father. The entire party of nearly fifty guests had to wait until he sauntered into the newly refurbished triclinium, where only Ancaris had the bad taste to remind Lysandra, "You must have mixed memories of this room, my lady. Was it here that the Pig Vitellius was entertained when you were my brother's property?"

Enobarbus had been asked by Max to stay at the villa until he could return armed with his divorce. Enobarbus began his task of protection now by reminding Ancaris loyally, "The Lady Lysandra was the perfect hostess then as she is today."

Ancaris said, "Ever the faithful aide, Barbus. I am surprised Max isn't jealous of you." But her venom had no power over them, and she began to look for her son. "Where is Flavius? He was so anxious to share a couch with the grownups."

Enobarbus grinned. "Off with Bacchus. The old rascal promised to show him the vines where the choicest wine comes from. When he leaves here, my lady, that boy will know more than we do about the matter."

Ancaris was concerned, but for some reason her interest seemed directed toward Helios. "Max promised we should have an amphora of his Pompeiian wine. Helios is picking up one for my brother—" She caught herself. "For the emperor

at the same time. He will bring them out to my litter and to the wagon carrying the emperor's travel gear."

"It isn't my wine to give," Max said, coming up behind Lysandra and drawing her back to him with his elbow and arm across her breast. "But Lysandra is generous. She will be happy to spare an amphora to you as well as to the emperor. The only surprising thing is that Helios condescends to do the manual labor of carrying out the jars himself."

Enobarbus had the answer. "The eunuch wants to get back into Emperor Titus' good graces."

Domitian heard this as he went into the triclinium. He looked glum and cross. "Not I. You won't see me groveling at my brother's feet." He wiped his forehead. "Gods, but the air is sultry today!" For Lysandra's benefit he boasted, "I wouldn't let a mistress of mine live in such a pesthole."

Lysandra was vigorously defending the normal Pompeian climate when Emperor Titus arrived and the meal could begin. At once, he pleased his younger brother by offering to share the first couch with him and with their hostess. Domitian was touched by the honor and his disposition improved. As for Lysandra, she was not as happy as she should have been. The arrangement meant that Max, the host, would share a couch with Ancaris. He too looked cross. The presence of Ancaris would prevent his conversation with the ambassador from King Agrippa, an old Jewish friend known to both Titus and Max.

Before Lysandra took her place on the first couch, Ancaris spoke to her. "Is Flavius safe, do you think? I'd rather he didn't attend a banquet of this kind while he is still so young. There is so much drinking. But I don't want him wandering around getting lost, either."

Lysandra shared her concern. "We could ask Helios to find the boy and Bacchus. He may have seen them in the kitchen."

Ancaris disagreed quickly. "No. Helios is busy carrying out those two wine jars."

It seemed a small enough task, but Lysandra didn't argue. She trusted Bacchus with the boy far more than she would ever trust the eunuch.

Titus' appetite was almost at an opposite pole from that of the late unlamented Vitellius. He ate like a soldier between duties, insisting on being served the hard, chewy legion-bread and pointing out how much healthier it was than meat and poultry and fish. Then he made his announcement which

would effectively end the bitter jealousy of his younger brother and the conniving of his bastard sister.

"Friends, take up your cups. I have a proposal that should be received with relief by the Senate and the empire as it must surely be by my family."

Domitian looked up. Ancaris frowned, but in a puzzled way, as if she did not understand what was being said. Titus went on in the breathless hush that had fallen over the room:

"For years, we have been plagued by the problem of the imperial succession. When Nero, the last of the true House of Caesar, died, he left no heir. I intend to remedy that for the Flavian House. I intend to share the consulship and duties of my office with my successor, so that he may 'grow up to the business,' as you might say. I propose to make my brother Domitian a consul of Rome, with the thought that he will be educated to the high office by the time I am dead. Which I hope," he added lightly, receiving the expected murmur of shock, "will not be for a few years."

In the short space before the cheer went up, everyone stared at Domitian. The recipient of all these honors may have suspected they were coming, but no one could doubt his gratitude as he bent his head and, taking his brother's hand, kissed the rough knuckles. When he raised his head there were tears in his eyes and he found it difficult to speak.

"Titus, you are good. I swear—I swear before you all—to be faithful to the emperor. You have made me the happiest man in your empire."

"Except one," the emperor contradicted him, laughing.

Lysandra wondered if Titus ever gave a thought these busy days to the woman he had loved, who was now back in her own land, hated by her own subjects. She looked at Max, but it was apparent no such thought occurred to him. He drank to his friend, the new emperor, obviously impressed by Titus' way of settling family strife. Then, with Titus and the others, he drank to Domitian. Titus had also rid Domitian of his sister's malign influence; for it was obvious to Lysandra that Domitian had completely forgotten Ancaris' busy efforts. He was enthralled by his new role and by Titus' obvious trust in him.

While all the attention was upon the two brothers, Lysandra watched Ancaris. The woman was behaving oddly. She had given a start, as if she suddenly recalled a matter of grave importance to her. Max and most of the guests present had gotten up and crowded around the two imperial brothers,

saluting them with newly filled cups of wine, but Ancaris kept looking toward the doors. Lysandra went to her.

"Are you worried about Flavius?"

The woman's golden eyes stared up at her, unseeing. "No! Yes! Of course. I must go and find him at once."

"Shall I send someone with you?"

"Gods, no! I must do it. Now."

She swept the gold silk and gauze around her body and hurried to the doors. No one even missed her, Lysandra realized as she watched the slight, reedlike creature, and then looked down at her own deep-blue-and-silver robe. Both she and Ancaris had worn gowns of these identical colors and materials on that night so many years ago, at the banquet given by Max for the municipal council of Lutetia. Lysandra had been seventeen then. She was twenty-eight now. It was a different world entirely, and perhaps, if Max got his divorce, it would be perfect again. She shivered. She had no real belief in perfection.

Since she was on her feet already, she followed Ancaris out of the triclinium, curious to know what had so upset the woman, and at this particular time. Ancaris rushed toward the kitchen area. Was she going after Flavius? But the boy had been out in the field with Bacchus learning about the making of good wines. Lysandra started after Ancaris, then stopped behind a column to watch as Ancaris met the eunuch Helios coming out of the kitchen with an amphora. To Lysandra's critical eye he was acting furtive, anxious not to be seen. Ancaris gave a sharp order, which he seemed to contest. Suddenly, in a kind of panic, she pushed the amphora with both hands. In spite of his attempt to save it, the big jar crashed to the paving stones at the beginning of the peristyle garden and rolled in a semicircle, its purple contents puddled up and trailing along the walk.

Ancaris gave the eunuch a quick wave of dismissal. Lysandra heard his voice raised in cold fury.

"There has to be an amphora. I told the emperor there would be."

"Then take the first one you find. We want no trouble. With Domitian chosen as his successor, almost to reign with him, nothing must happen. Domitian would be suspected at once."

Still angry, Helios stepped back into the kitchen and picked up an amphora. Carrying this, he opened the garden gate and gave his load to one of the emperor's Praetorian

Guards. Meanwhile, Ancaris returned to the banquet, which had broken up. When both Helios and Ancaris were gone from the peristyle, Lysandra examined the spilled wine. There was no way of telling now, but she wouldn't have been surprised to discover that the original amphora meant for the emperor had been poisoned. Ancaris' panic arose when Titus freely gave his younger brother everything she had fought and schemed for. Titus' assassination might reflect on Domitian and destroy his chances forever. With the young man's new power, Ancaris would be wise to preserve the health of Emperor Titus, and she knew it.

What a devious, wicked creature! Lysandra thought, and then wondered if she would be so suspicious of a woman who was not married to Maximian. But there were long, bitter memories connected with Ancaris, beginning in Lutetia with her seduction of Lysandra's father for the sake of a little extra monetary profit. The same motive had caused her to remain the Pig Vitellius' friend until that day on the arena field.

While the other guests scrambled to get their own transportation ready, not quite matching the speed of Emperor Titus, Max searched for Lysandra to say their farewells. He found her still in the peristyle garden and took her in his arms.

"My love, don't disappear like that," he ordered her tenderly. "Now that we are so close to the beginning of our real life together, I keep dreaming I've lost you."

"I'm here, darling. I'm here." There was no point in adding to his nightmares with her own.

Their kiss had in it all the old passion, but also deeper feelings now, the longing for each other's company, the sense that they could not bear to lose each other again.

Titus called to him from outside the garden gate.

"Come along, Max. This horse of mine can't wait to get out of here. Must be anxious to see you get that divorce. Ho, there! Did you ever see such a temperamental brute? He acts as if the very demons of Black Tartarus were after him."

Lysandra walked with Max through the gate toward the stables. The rest of the party was already on its noisy way, knowing that Titus and Max would soon gallop past them and be far in the lead. Max mounted, then bent to kiss Lysandra again. He was an excellent horseman, but even he was almost unseated by the apparent panic of the horse. Max let Lysandra go, but she saw the troubled look in his eyes.

"Keep well. Keep safe, *carissima*," he ordered her. "I'll

ride all the way back, stopping only to change horses. I won't sleep until I'm home again, I promise you."

She blew him a kiss and waved until he and Titus and the latter's guards were out of sight. She was jarred out of her strange, suspended state by the noisy cackle of geese in the fields beyond. She had never noticed all these barnyard disturbances before. Perhaps one of the guests had somehow upset the livestock.

Then she wiped her forehead, but her flesh was too hot to perspire. The livestock all became silent at the same time, as if on signal. It seemed to her that the air had never been so dry or so quiet.

She didn't know how long she stood there, dreaming of Max's return and telling herself any other thoughts were simply the result of their past terrors, when the spell of absolute silence was broken by the voice of the one person she hated in the world. Ancaris called with a mixture of anxiety and impatience, "Flavius! Don't hide from me. Flavius, where are you?"

With a sigh Lysandra turned back to the gate. She could always forgive the woman when her concern was for her son, Perseus' son.

"Ancaris? The boy must be in the vineyards with old Bacchus."

Ancaris came out past the wall of the peristyle and garden. She began to say something snappish about Bacchus when her fingers went to her mouth, stifling a cry of horror. She pointed with her other hand at the horizon beyond Lysandra.

"Holy Mother Isis! What is happening? What is it?"

Lysandra remembered that the brooding shadow of Mt. Vesuvius lay just behind and above this area of the villa. She said coolly, "It's only the mountain."

And then she turned.

Chapter Six

As she turned she dismissed Mt. Vesuvius like a true Pompeian. "It's been extinct for centuries. You've nothing to worry about."

She expected to see the clouds that normally hovered low over the peak of the great mountain. Sometimes, swept forward by the wind, they blotted out all sunlight, and then came the healthy rains that produced old Bacchus' best wines.

But there were no rain clouds. Only a great stem of darkness belching forth from the crown of the mountain, spreading until it bloomed into the shape of an enormous, blackened tree with tongues of fire chasing its roots.

Hardly believing this phenomenon, Lysandra stammered, "It—it can't be. The volcano is dead." She hadn't gotten the word out of her mouth when the earth heaved and then jarred underfoot. A hideous, crunching noise made her swing around to these new dangers. The screech of masonry as it cracked was worse than the astonishing sight of the mountain spewing ashes or the first rumble from a firepit no one had known to exist.

"Does that look dead to you?" Ancaris demanded, heavy with sarcasm that even outweighed her fear. "Does it feel dead? If this is a prelude to one of your massive earthquakes, I want to be out of Pompeii with Flavius before it gets any worse." She raised her voice. "Flavius! Come here at once! . . . Where is that impossible old Zostra? She usually knows."

Returning to the garden-peristyle, she kept looking over her shoulder at the towering mountain whose peculiar cloud of darkness changed colors from black to ashy gray. It seemed to be spewing out bulky objects, rocks, chunks of what appeared to be whitish stone. But all this was not as close as the terrible rumbling beneath their feet.

"Don't look at it. It will only slow you," Lysandra warned her breathlessly, running along in a row of fallow ground. Al-

ready she could see that neither Bacchus nor the child was in sight. The few slaves who had been working on the vegetable garden north of the vineyards had dropped their tools and begun to run like scattered insects, in all directions.

Lysandra swung around, coughing as she gulped the mephitic, smoky air, and motioned Ancaris back. "It's no use. They aren't here."

"Then he's in the villa."

Ancaris was now some distance ahead of her, holding up her skirts, her thin ankles lashed and scratched by the dry debris of summer in the fields.

They had barely reached the villa wall when it seemed to split before their eyes, the whitewashed masonry crumbling outward. The women missed the sharp blocks, but in the cloud of rising powder Ancaris slipped off the heap of rubble and turned her ankle. Lysandra pulled her onward. The two women were united in one all-important object, to find the boy Flavius.

There was none of the seasick, rolling sensation Lysandra remembered from the earthquake she had shared years ago with Max. She knew now that Vesuvius, the "evil old woman," as Bacchus had called her, was the source of this latest disaster. When she disobeyed her own rule and glanced up at Vesuvius from the steps leading to the upper quarters, she couldn't believe the sight.

The sky above the mountain was a mass of fiery debris. It exploded over the slopes, which had come alive with white ash and hideous clouds of dust and pumice, rapidly rolling down over the city's suburbs. Even there at the villa the air was so thick she could hardly see the fire in the heart of the volcanic explosions, but it was getting harder to breathe. She called over the balustrade, "Look in the kitchen. Bacchus is often there."

With a cough that wracked her body, Ancaris vanished into the kitchen, ignoring the garden air, which had become gray and opaque. Somewhere in a nearby villa a dog began to bark in panic and desperation, but any other animal sounds were blurred by the wrenching of walls, the toppling of statues and altars. It should end now. Previous quakes had stopped within seconds, leaving a half-destroyed city, but blessed silence.

Getting to her feet after bumping painfully into the door-frame, Lysandra caught glimpses of flames leaping on the distant mountain among the ash, pumice, and lava which had

already reached the suburban vineyards at the foot of the steep green slopes of Vesuvius. For the first time she realized there might be a greater horror than the earthquakes themselves. The overflow of noxious gases, pumice, and ash might actually reach the heart of the city in minutes. The rolling gray fog had made astonishing progress already.

Several pillars along the colonnade near the kitchen area had been shaken off their bases. The ground beneath must be weak. One pillar was wedged deep into the paving stones, and others threatened to plunge down through the earth at the edge of the garden.

In one of the rooms opening off the atrium on the east side of the villa Lysandra came upon her first deadly evidence of the mountain's terrible power. The roof had collapsed over two male servants who were fleeing toward the front doors. The older of the two was scarcely known to her, but the younger was the freedman Lucipor, who had given her the clue that saved the empire for General Titus. A warm and devoted young man. Lysandra dug through dust and debris and examined Lucipor, hoping against hope for signs of life. No use.

The older of the two men still breathed. Lysandra dragged him out in a shower of rattling tile. Blinking and coughing, the slave could barely see Lysandra when he was free of his prison but he scrambled to his feet, half-crawling, and made a dash for the street doors.

Lysandra grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him.

"The child Flavius. Did you see him?"

"Zostra, the Persian harpy. She left minutes before the quakes. Must be at the city gates with the boy by now—if she's wise."

The slave thrust her aside, rushed out into the insanity of the streets.

Lysandra called to Ancaris. There was no answer and no time. She followed the slave into the street and found herself in the midst of wild terror. The running, stumbling crowd carried their valuable possessions on their shoulders or dragged them over the cobbles and down between the steppingstones at each corner.

Lysandra thought she made out the litter of the old Persian woman at the far end of the street. Zostra would think her mistress had gone with the emperor. Zostra herself must have taken the boy. It wouldn't be the first time she had inherited his care.

If the boy was with her, both Lysandra and Ancaris would be able to escape like these other terrified souls. She found her teeth chattering as if she were frozen, and yet it grew harder and harder to breathe in the hot ash-filled air.

Lysandra had lived a healthy, outdoor life in these last few years, and she carried no household furniture or heavy coffers of jewels to impede her. She threaded her way along the street faster than those around her, and near the sea gate she caught the litter of the old Persian woman. Zostra's attendants trotted along, ignoring Lysandra as she pulled aside the curtains.

The old woman was alone. She didn't seem surprised to see Lysandra.

"The boy is with his mother and the emperor, of course. He must be. They left half an hour ago, before this began," she answered Lysandra's question, and then ordered the slaves, "Hurry, hurry!"

"But he isn't."

Zostra sat up. Concern finally etched sharp new lines in her ancient face.

"Then he is with the old caretaker. They were sampling wines. I'll go back with you."

"No. Go on. You won't be needed." In spite of the gathering dusk around them, a little over an hour after noon, and half an hour since the eruption had started, Lysandra felt her spirits brighten. Suddenly she was sure she knew where they would find Flavius and old Bacchus.

She left Zostra and ran back up the hilly street against the crowd, jolted this way and that by hard, sharp corners of furniture and by heavy packs of a life's possessions bundled in a coverlet. At the moment of impact she felt very little pain. Her whole object was to reach the villa and find the boy's hiding place.

Along the street the weaker ones among the fleeing citizens slipped and fell, and the tide of humanity rushed on over them. The fallen ones found it impossible to rise. They were lost. Lysandra tried not to think of these still-moving, struggling people whose bodies were trampled by the more fortunate who were on their feet. From overhead the rain of ash and pumice was further complicated now by fireballs and strange, gaseous clouds.

Lysandra reached the villa. The heavy front door was still open, wrenched off its hinges by the latest upheaval. She stared across the garden, then stopped in disbelief. Already

the grass had disappeared under a pall of white ash. The marble benches were covered. The fountain trickled through a fresh cloud of descending ash and pumice so hot the water in the fountain hissed and steamed. Worst of all, every time she breathed, Lysandra inhaled the peculiar gaseous odor. In the tablinum she caught a panic-stricken Ancaris, who was screaming her son's name.

"Hush! He must be in the cellar. Be quiet and we may hear him."

A shower of fiery black pebbles rained down on them from a sky rapidly turning to night, though the eruption had begun less than half an hour before. With a shriek Ancaris ran back into the kitchen, whose roof was shifting in places. The tiles still poured down, sharp and cutting obstacles for the women in their light sandals. Several parts of the room were open to the sky. The wild downpour of burning tufa and ash acted like a smothering blanket over their constricted world.

"The cellar!" Lysandra cried, pushing Ancaris along. Ancaris jumped to avoid the fiery shower, and her feet made hollow sounds on the floor beneath. Belatedly, she understood and tried to help Lysandra pry open the trapdoor. Lysandra explained, "Flavius talked about wine, and old Bacchus keeps most of the amphoras in a cellar below the kitchen and garden."

They were assailed by hard, burning black pellets. Both Lysandra and Ancaris ignored this new danger. At the same moment they heard faint, haunting sounds like the sobs of a child. They fell to their knees, bloodied their fingers, and broke off their nails trying to free the trapdoor.

Ancaris pleaded, "Please. Be quiet!" She laid her head against the wooden barrier and listened. Her strained features twisted in anguish.

"Poor little lamb! In that awful dark all alone."

Lysandra tried to console her. "He wouldn't be alone. Old Bacchus must be with him." But she knew that if Bacchus was alive, he would be pounding on the inside of that trapdoor. There seemed to be added horror if the child was sealed in with the body of Bacchus.

They went to work again on the door. This time Ancaris kept prying under the top bolt with pieces of tile. They were both coughing now. Breathing had become a serious problem, and Lysandra looked around the kitchen at the cracked and broken dishes, pots, the stove itself, which had split in two. Burnt coals from the roasting of the banquet meats poured

out on the stone floor. There was a huge basin in which two kitchen slaves had been washing the silver and copper and clay dishes on which the guests had eaten. She took a handful out of the hundreds of napkins used at a typical Roman banquet, soaked them in the cloudy, ash-filled water, and gave one to Ancaris, saving some for the boy.

The trap door opened amid clouds of the dust and burning fragments that had covered it.

"Let me," Ancaris insisted and scrambled down the steps into the darkness. Immediately, she screamed. "Dear Gods! A body. On the steps."

"Not Flavius!"

"An old man. Flavius, my baby, where are you? Can you call me? It's Mother, my love. Call to me."

Lysandra searched what remained of the kitchen, found a lamp with a wick floating in the oil, and set it alight with the help of the burning fragments scattered over the stone floor.

In the kitchen the light had dimmed to the color of dusk, and the air was so thick she could no longer see the opposite side of the peristyle. When she took the lamp down the steps, coughing and wheezing as she breathed the thick air, both women saw the body of old Bacchus for the first time. Bacchus had climbed up the steps, reached up, and in his dying moments, clawed at the trapdoor, which had jammed shut. The back of his head was crushed and bloody. He must have been hit by the base of one of the colonnade pillars, which had plowed through the ground, broken through the cellar's thin wooden roof, and plunged to the cellar's dirt floor.

Behind the fallen pillar, Flavius' pale young face shone in the dull glow from the lamp. His eyes looked enormous. It took him a moment to recognize the two women he loved, and he kept sobbing, dry hiccup sounds that wrenched Lysandra's heart. She longed to take him in her arms. But though he tried to free his hands and stretch them out to his mother and Lysandra, it was clear that he had been pinned down by enormous weights. The gaseous air was only now creeping in around the ragged hole in the ceiling through which the pillar had torn its way.

"Where are you hurt, my darling?" Ancaris asked hoarsely, trying to drag him out of his earthen grave. Over her shoulder she complained to Lysandra, "He smells of wine. These accursed jars must have broken over him."

The boy cried out in sudden pain as she pulled him by his

right shoulder and arm. Instinctively, Lysandra shouted, "No!" and asked the boy, "Where does it hurt?"

"M—my head."

"Move your fingers and toes."

The boy said, "They're all right. It's my head. It aches, B-Bacchus said it would. He let me sip from the jars."

"Gods!" Ancaris screamed. "He got my boy drunk."

While Lysandra dug frantically under the fallen pillar to free the boy, she muttered, "it may have saved him from madness these last few minutes."

But even with Ancaris' desperate help she couldn't move the pillar, which had been wedged in by other broken pillars overhead.

"I'll have to go up and start at the top," Lysandra decided. "The boy isn't badly hurt yet, but even if I can manage to shift this, the one above will fall through that hole in the ceiling."

"Don't leave us," Ancaris pleaded, just as they all heard a heavy bombardment of a tile roof somewhere overhead. The ash and pumice was now mixed with large coals of fire. Flavius' dry sobs of fear stopped. His big eyes stared at the ceiling. The women blinked at each other through the thickened air, wondering. Had he sensed something they couldn't hear?

Marble dust, ash and pumice, and now burning coals poured through the hole sliced out by the broken pillars. The grinding noise increased. The last upheaval must have set another column off its base.

Lysandra whispered, "Get farther over the boy. As far as possible." She took her own advice only just in time. The world collapsed in on them. Lysandra felt herself stifling. She buried her face in the damp napkin and hid her head between her arms. She couldn't breathe. She heard herself gagging, choking. She hadn't known how agonizing it was not to be able to pull breath into her lungs.

With a last awareness of the truth, she thought: Max. I knew it could never remain the way it was. Not for us. We were too happy. The gods wouldn't permit us to be perfectly happy. No one is. . . .

She was roused to consciousness by moans wrenched from a creature in unbearable pain. She felt around in the darkness. The lamp was buried in rubble. The air was hot, and everything she touched burned her fingers. Her body was buried in pumice and ash, and now coals that burned holes in her gown and her exposed ankles. She jerked her legs back,

stirring the coat of dust anew. Someone coughed, great, rack-ing coughs. It was Flavius.

She called, "Flavius. Are you all right?"

"It's Mother. Help Mother," he managed to say in a strange, mature voice, hoarse with the dust he had inhaled.

Thanking all the gods that at least the child was not more seriously hurt, she felt over the pillar to Ancaris. It was Ancaris who moaned.

"How bad is it, Ancaris? Where were you hurt?"

"Too late. Save him." The unfortunate woman began to moan again with each tortured breath.

Lysandra found the second pillar. It had broken in two when it fell through the ceiling upon Ancaris' body from her breasts to her thighs. The broken end of the pillar had shoved the first marble column over about the length of a man's foot. It might be possible to release the boy, after all.

She tried, heaved and shoved, using her feet for leverage, all the while haunted by the moaning of the crushed woman. Another great effort only made the injured woman shriek, and Flavius began to sob again.

"Don't hurt her. Please."

To her own horror Lysandra panicked. She cried, "I've got to move this. Don't you understand? It's the only way. Dear gods, help us!"

Flavius cried weakly, gulping and coughing. "It's dark. Can't you do something?"

At the end of her emotional tether, Lysandra snapped, "I can't do any more. I need help. Don't you understand?" Her voice, scared and panic-stricken, was contagious, and he howled louder than ever. She felt for his face. It was gritty with dust and dirt and thicker particles. She patted his cheek.

"I'll get help. I'll come right back."

"No. Don't leave Mother," he wailed.

She bent over Ancaris, whose pale face caught a faint gleam of light from the dusk that shrouded the world above-ground.

"I'll get help. Can you hold on?"

Ancaris' lips framed words silently. Only groans came through. Lysandra felt around, trying to remove sharp bits of tile from under the imprisoned woman's head and shoulders. But there must be a foot of ash and pumice around her and the boy. Minutes were precious now.

Trying not to hurt her companions further, Lysandra made her way to the steps, too obsessed by her mission to wonder

at the phenomenon of the gathering debris from the volcano itself. Even in this cellar it appeared that Ancaris and her son—Perseus' own son—might be completely buried within the next few minutes. Already, Bacchus' body was hidden by its enormous covering of ash.

Some of the steps were missing. She scrambled up over the splintered wood and reached the kitchen, carefully closing the trap door. It took all her strength to wade through warm tufa and ash, knee deep with their levels rising. The ash, though inert, presented a curious barrier, like wading through deep, still water. She kept the napkin pressed hard against her nose and mouth, but the cloth was drying and one side was already coated. She got to the peristyle. In a dim corner she saw a water clock. By some miracle it still registered. Less than an hour ago the emperor and Max and all the others had been here enjoying the banquet and talking of Max's divorce. Now, in the second hour after noon, the world was shrouded in a ghastly night. She made out gray-covered slabs where two of the columns had collapsed into the cellar below.

She made her way through the endless rain of heated rocks and tufa and examined the fallen columns. Her feet came to an obstacle completely covered. She dug away the dust. A female. That gentle Noriah who had been her companion ever since she became a countrywoman. The pillar must have struck her, and she fell, suffocating beneath this gray shroud, Lysandra leaned against the peristyle and cried. But her tears dried on her cheeks.

Coughing through the meager protection of her sleeve, she shrugged off burning bits of blackened rock and waded through the comparatively lighter fall of ash to the atrium and out the front doors. Her voice croaked, "Help me, someone. Please. A little boy . . ."

Through the dark, gray pall there were still running, stumbling figures. Some ran toward the dreaded mountain, to rescue treasures from outlying houses before they were lost to looters or the volcanic upheaval. There were fires blazing throughout the broken city. The noise was a hideous jumble of tearing, splitting walls, the awful whistle of fissures in the earth, and somewhere hidden in all this, the weak voices of human agony and terror. She couldn't hear her own scream for help when she tried again out in the street, jostled by the panicked mob.

A running man fell over her. He picked himself up, would

have run on, but she recognized his bulbous face and pleaded.

"You are the apple seller back of the Forum."

He scarcely understood her. The air was full of strange, smoking light that proved to be live coals.

"Let me go."

"Please tell the emperor that his sister and her child were entombed in the Claudian villa."

He recovered enough to ask, "You're General Max's mistress. What about you?"

"I don't know. I'll stay to get them out. I can't let the child die alone."

She twisted the freedman's ring she had bought the day Vespasian witnessed her manumission. She took it off, forced it into his shaking palm.

"Take this. The emperor and General Maximian will know who wore it."

"Yes. Yes. Don't cling to me."

She raised her voice, called after him, the effort tearing at her throat, "They are sure to send help. Tell the first imperial officer you see."

He made no response beyond huddling into his travel cloak, which he had draped over his head, and trotting along as fast as his short legs would carry him.

Lysandra knew he would do nothing. Her effort had only been a gesture born of her desperation. She started back to the house. The world tilted and recovered under another bad shake. She wasn't conscious of the screams around her, but of a dog chained somewhere, perhaps in the next house, howling his own despair. She stood holding onto the front door and gazed incredulously up at the mountain. Its green slopes with their vineyards and farms were now an inferno lighting the sky around with a glare like the inside of a furnace. Heat waves rode on the gaseous, explosive air. She rushed inside the villa.

Already the accumulated ash was above her knees in the open areas and rising every minute. She made her way through the passages still partially covered and reached the kitchen. The trapdoor was a foot deep in ash and pumice. The wood itself had begun to smolder. She stamped it out. The noise she made aroused young Flavius. She heard him sobbing, "I'm here. I'm here. It's all dark."

She raised the door. "I'm coming, darling. Don't be afraid."

Don't be afraid. . . .

Max. It doesn't change anything for us, my darling, except the time we had together. This is better than the denial we lived before. You will know—oh, Max, please know—I loved you with my last thought. . . .

She felt her way down the stairs, remembering to avoid the body of the old caretaker.

We may be with you soon, Old Bacchus, she thought.

"Call to me, Flavius. Let me follow your voice."

Deeply muffled, his voice reached her. "You came back!"

She found him. He had tried to cover his mother's face with his free hand while he held his breath or blew frantically to get rid of the clogged air. Instinctively, he was trying to save Ancaris.

Lysandra touched his face. He seemed to have shaken off the ash as it covered him and his mother. His upper torso was almost free. Surely there must be a way to free him. She ran her fingers over Ancaris' delicate face. The woman was hopelessly pinned under the two columns. But there was still some life there. Lysandra took short, gasping breaths. It was hard to remember that this woman was her enemy. Ancaris was simply a sufferer like Flavius and Lysandra.

"Ancaris, can you hear me?"

This time Ancaris made an enormous effort. Her breath was harsh, irregular, her voice a whisper.

"Get—him—out."

"Soon," Lysandra lied. "They are coming to save us. I sent a message by someone in the street."

"She hurts," Flavius complained. "Can't you do something?"

"I know." Lysandra felt around through the ash and pumice, tried to sift it in under the first broken pillar that had imprisoned the woman. Anything to relieve the pressure. Ancaris was no longer moaning. Her pain seemed to have eased. She spoke suddenly in a loud, clear voice.

"Perseus was stupid. But . . . so charming. His son. Swear to—"

"I swear by Athena Polias, I will care for him."

"Don't let—forget me."

For an instant Lysandra hesitated. She had hated this woman for almost twelve years. But she said then, "I swear."

Even as she swore, Lysandra began to dig under the pillar and the endless sifting ash to free Flavius. So close to success, the pillar shifted. Not enough. Ancaris was quiet. Lysandra

raised her head. Only her own stertorious breathing and that of the boy were now audible. Ancaris had ceased her agonizing effort to breathe.

Lysandra whispered, to whatever gods might hear, "Help the boy," and her voice lashed her to new effort. The pillar shifted back to its former place. Flavius screamed. She was too exhausted even to apologize. She threw herself into the effort once more.

Within the thick, smothering air she smelled burning wood. There must be a house on fire somewhere.

Her thoughts floated off into vague reveries, a remembrance of happy times.

Flavius' voice begged between sobs, "Don't go to sleep. Please don't . . ."

She made motions again, trying to shift the pillar, but they were only motions, and she knew it. She reached for Flavius, tried to console him. He whispered in a very old, worn voice, "Mother's covered with ashes. They're hot."

"I know, dearest. But she doesn't feel any pain now."

He seemed to understand. With difficulty she rested his cheek against her own and cried silently. Even if they were found here by some intervention of the gods, they could never get beyond the villa. By now it would be impossible to move through the broken streets under a rain of fire.

Suddenly, Flavius raised his head, listening.

"Somebody's there. Over our heads."

For a moment she thought he referred to the gods.

"Perhaps, dear. But the gods are very busy."

"No. No. People. Listen."

She heard nothing but the distant roar, a cacophony of sounds, until heavy, booted steps rang on the outside bolt of the trapdoor. The door itself must be deep in ash now, and in all likelihood the intruder—who might be looting?—had no idea the cellar existed. Lysandra opened her mouth to call for help. Only a dry, croaking sound came out. She tried to get up, but it was as if a world of feathers held her prisoner. Her lungs were bursting. She could no longer breathe.

It is over, she thought dreamily. . . . Help may be so near and I haven't the strength to make a sound.

Chapter Seven

Flavius raised his head, shaking off her protective hand, and squawked out, "Help! Please come."

It was hardly more than a whisper, but louder than any sound Lysandra could make. Her heart seemed to thunder through her body as she and Flavius waited. Something, probably fire or the fall of heavy rocks and pumice stones, had concealed the trapdoor. Lysandra could hear boots stamping over the floor, testing it to find the metal bolt far beneath the ash and debris.

Then came piercing shrieks from the trapdoor as it was raised and the entombed pair were smothered by a great influx of ash that had piled upon the door.

"Slowly, general! Easy does it."

The harsh, anxious voice raised Lysandra from despair to Olympian heights. It was Enobarbus, trying to restrain Max from burying those he loved. Lysandra struggled to move, made croaking noises in her throat. But she had forgotten that Flavius was still held in the earth beneath the crossed pillars. He cried out as she pulled away from him.

"Don't leave me . . . it's so dark. . . ."

Then Max's voice and his heavy sandal-boots shaking the stairs. He carried a shielded lantern of the kind used by farmers. He leaped over the broken stairs and the great ash-covered mound that was the body of old Bacchus. Lysandra, forgetting the panic-stricken child for a moment, crawled toward Max, who wasn't making any sense.

"*Carissima!* In the cellar. I said so. The apple man from the Forum met us. On our way back here. We felt the first quakes. We saw the mountains. It took an eternity getting here. God!" He added then, remembering to comfort her, "But we'll make it through."

"I don't care," she whispered in his arms. "We will get out some way." She remembered Flavius. "The boy! He's trapped."

Enobarbus took the lantern, set it on the step with the farm ax he had used to pry open the trapdoor. Then he went to work tugging the broken pillar which had fallen across the column that pinned the child into the earth. Max took a damp, warm cloth from his sword belt.

"Hold it over your face, sweetheart."

Then he got hold of the other end of the pillar. The air filled with ash stirred up by their every movement. The men began to choke, and Enobarbus doubled over, gasping for breath. Max kept shifting the marble, bit by bit. His boot slipped, kicked something soft and yielding beneath the ashes. He knew before he uncovered it what he would find.

"Is it—?"

Lysandra tried to get the name out, but her mouth was full of grit and dust. Flavius' plaintive little voice succeeded where she failed.

"It's Mother. We tried. But she was hurt bad. So bad."

"I know," Max said tenderly, brushing new ash off the boy's face. Then he tested the dead woman for her heartbeat and pulse. In spite of the debris that had kept the atmosphere heated, it was obvious that Ancaris had been dead for some minutes. Unlike her son's body, protected in the earth beneath the pillar, she had received the full impact of the second pillar's fall, and her torso had been crushed. Max borrowed the lantern and held it while Enobarbus examined her.

"Too late."

Flavius' small hand reached for Lysandra. He had known the truth. They need not spare him.

Max stared at Ancaris' body, which seemed to be carved out of gray ash. Enobarbus urged him, "Hurry. There's no time."

Max reached for the pillar. Together they shifted it. Flavius stirred excitedly.

"It's easier now. I can move my legs."

There was still the pillar beneath to shift. The end of the column had been driven into the earth wall, and it took the combined efforts of both men and Lysandra to move it carefully without bringing down the dirt ceiling.

"Now! Pull him out!" Max ordered.

In a matter of seconds she got Flavius under the arms, dragged him out a little more than a foot. Far enough to free him. He crawled into the haven of Lysandra's arms.

Enobarbus took a breath, remembered the danger tardily, and with a wracking cough could only shove Lysandra and

the boy toward the stairs. Max came behind them. He had placed a cloth over the face of his dead wife. Lysandra could not begin to imagine what he felt about the death of Ancaris, if anything. She herself had shared the last terrible hour with the woman who had ruined Lysandra's life long ago, and sent her father to his death. For Lysandra, the "enemy" had died when Vesuvius blew off. During the following hour Ancaris had been the comrade in an agony they had shared.

Enobarbus took Flavius' arms and drew him up the steps by his arms. The boy seemed physically unhurt by his ordeal and had stopped crying. Having been trapped in the first quake, he was too awestruck by the strange world he found aboveground to think of his mother now shrouded by ashes.

Max caught the trembling Lysandra and lifted her up out of the cellar that had been her grave as well, and into the kitchen, which was dark as midnight and deep in what felt like hot, dry dust and sand. She had known it would be difficult, but even her experience half an hour earlier hadn't prepared her for this ghastly world of darkness at midafternoon, making it more difficult to force her body through the debris of the volcanic flood.

Before beginning a journey that all of them knew would be deadly, Max reminded them to keep cloths tight over their noses and their mouths. The cloth he used felt like linen torn out of a tunic or shift. He had dipped the cloth in water earlier, but now all fresh water was buried beneath a flood of gritty pumice and blackened fireballs smoldering and smoking as they died out in ashes. Max tied the strip over the lower half of Lysandra's face and then prepared Flavius. By the time Max had protected his own face with a half-mask, Enobarbus was ready and picked up the boy, who was in danger of smothering if he tried to move through the deep accumulation of ash.

Enobarbus led the way, carrying Flavius, whose legs trailed in the volcanic debris, and Max followed, half-carrying Lysandra, with his arm around her waist and under her breasts. She wanted to walk if possible. She knew that a time might come all too soon when she would have to be carried, and she wanted to preserve the strength of the men. There was no telling what obstacles would be in their way through the streets now. By following the wall of the tablinum and then wending their way over the destruction of the beautiful atrium, they reached the front door.

Enobarbus started back at his first sight of the street, and

Max and Lysandra guessed that even his courage cringed at the prospect ahead of them. With Max's help, Lysandra dragged herself around the great door, now jammed half-closed and burning in several places where it had been bombarded with fireballs from the exploding mountain.

Lysandra found the noise of the street unbearable at first. She tried to cover her ears but soon found she needed the impetus of her arms to move among the thousand obstacles ahead. The darkness of this eerie midafternoon was illuminated by whirlwinds of gaseous fire sweeping down from the mountain through the streets. With them came watery particles that burned the flesh as they fell. And above the inferno of the city rose the scream of rending timbers, the crash of marble temples, the fall of the great arch dedicated to Emperor Nero, and the despair of crazed and dying humanity.

As they made their way out into the street, Enobarbus remarked in the most matter-of-fact way, "I thought there'd be lava. The whole mountain's boiling. Where's the lava?"

"On the Herculaneum side, probably. We're on the windward slopes. Watch those bodies!"

Enobarbus leaped over two ash-covered masses on the street, swinging Flavius' legs up to avoid the destruction. Seconds later, Flavius and Lysandra both screamed. The heavens rained water that boiled and hissed as it burned their flesh and clothing. Max boosted Lysandra ahead of him, trying to cover her head with one hand. But he must have understood that she was hardly aware of the pain. She stumbled on, helped by his arm, anxious not to slow his quick stride.

There were fewer crowds now, only scattered figures ahead of them, a mother with three small children who kept falling, an old man and woman, neither of whom would move when the other stumbled over one of the pumice-covered bodies in their path. Lysandra felt Max's start of surprise, or horror. His step slowed. She raised her head, saw an astonishing sight. Ahead of them in the middle of their path, two fleeing figures writhed, their sex and age impossible to guess. They had become brightly burning torches, their clothing and flesh set afire by the deadly, gaseous whirlwind that showered the dying city.

Max and Enobarbus stopped, swung around as if there might be a safer alley. They could not retrace steps that had already turned to ash behind them. They were in time to see the peak of the fiery mountain suddenly split open and the broken peak roll down through the flame-engulfed slopes,

picking up speed and size until this enormous fireball headed straight for Pompeii. With incredible force it leaped over the city wall.

Running as he had never run in his life, Enobarbus pressed the boy's face firmly against his breast armor, hunching his own shoulders in defense against the rain of fire. Max and Lysandra struggled around an obstacle that was ignited and glowing with a blue flame. Another body.

They were within sight of the sea gate when they realized that the mass of what appeared to be steam rising ahead of them was human beings boiling to death, caught in their flight by the rain of volcanic mist. Max turned abruptly, his heel crunching upon metal. Beneath his sandal he had uncovered hundreds of spilled coins, sesterces, obols, and even gold auriae that glittered in the unnatural firelight. Their owner lay far beneath the ashes.

Enobarbus tripped over a high crossing stone and fell, managing to drop his full weight on his left side, saving the boy from anything more serious than bruised legs and the shock of losing a safe harbor in the centurion's arms. Max and Lysandra crouched beside him. Max lowered the cloth from his mouth.

"Barbus, old friend, where are you hurt? Let me help you."

Lysandra took Flavius in her arms. He was stiff with terror and had long since ceased to shed tears.

"Will we die like Mother?"

"No. No. We've only a little way to go. You must be brave, the way your mother was."

The world over their heads appeared to blaze in a brief noon sky. The great fireballs had broken up and spread over the city, falling like a hail of molten rock. The boy screamed. Lysandra tried to cover him with her body while Max beat out splintered fires on his friend's back. Enobarbus groaned. Apparently his left arm was broken. It had taken the full impact of his fall. Max got him to his feet with difficulty.

"Twisted this accursed leg, too," Enobarbus apologized. "You hurry on. I'll catch you."

"Don't be ridiculous. Come!"

Urged on by the horror around them, they started up again. At Lysandra's pantomimed suggestion, Max picked up the stupefied child while she led Enobarbus, who had to lean hard on her shoulder for support, mumbling apologies and wincing with pain under the shower of fiery fragments.

Lysandra had pulled her tired body through the inferno for

so long she had no idea where they were. But in spite of the dark terror through which they moved now, less than two hours after the eruption, she preferred this to the living death of the villa cellar.

Max turned, offered her his free hand, and they moved a little faster.

Then Enobarbus' tired body collapsed again. Lysandra went down with him. Max pushed the boy between the pillars of a collapsed marble law court and snatched Lysandra away from the fallen man, thrusting her against Flavius. He had just turned to drag Enobarbus out of the twisted, earthquake-torn street when Lysandra saw the immediate danger. Huge balls of gaseous fire roared down the street toward them.

Lysandra reached for the injured man. The fire swept by with a whistling, hissing sound, drowning Enobarbus' death-cry. The wind whirled on, leaving them with the burned remains of the man who had been at various times the savior of both Max and Lysandra.

Max bent over the huddled body for brief seconds. He raised his head. His face was masked with ashes, but the despairing look in his eyes told her how much he had cared for this old comrade.

"Come, *carissima*." She failed to get to her feet the first time she tried. He lifted her until she could stand. Then he picked up Flavius, who held out his arms dumbly toward Enobarbus. Dust and ash had already begun to coat his body. Max turned the boy's face away and covered it with his singed army cape.

Lysandra stumbled beside him, taking long, blind steps around obstacles in the street. Max drew her to him with his free arm.

"Soon, my love. Soon. This is the gateway."

She wouldn't believe it until she felt the little wharf beneath her feet. She could see nothing in the stifling air. The knowledge gradually came to her that the Bay of Neapolis lay out there around them.

Max set Flavius on his feet and then shook Lysandra gently.

"We are safe, my love. Can you see the sail on the little boat at the bottom of the steps? There are dozens here. Sent to rescue the surviv—the people. Can you walk?"

She nodded. He kissed the encrusted mask she wore. "Keep telling yourself, it's all over."

She mumbled behind the stiff dirty cloth. He eyed her anxiously. "Wait."

She stood trying to see through the murky dark. There was panic here, wild as that within the city, but this was controlled. Even on the waterfront the blackened air was suddenly lighted by burning fragments, with the sickening, pervasive odor of sulfur. To Lysandra the world sounded like one long groan of terror. She put a trembling hand out, touched Flavius.

"Soon," she promised him. "Don't cry."

Whatever his tight face indicated, he could not cry. Over the linen protection, his great, puzzled eyes were dry, with fear etched in the ash that turned his face gray. It was this realization that aroused her from her own stupor. She lowered the dirty, thick linen from her face and took his stiff hands.

She could not speak aloud, but she whispered, "Flavius, you aren't alone."

He moved his head, looked down the wharf steps to see Max in the bright flash of firelight just as their world toppled in another cataclysm. The earth shook and righted itself. The child fell against her. Max, who had caught the mooring lines of the little rescue vessel, dropped the ropes and hurriedly made his way up the stone steps. At the top of the quai Lysandra and the boy met him. They made no sound while he settled them on the middle thwart of the boat. A dozen shivering, stupefied refugees crowded around them in the boat. All wore clothing that was burned in some way, but like Lysandra and the boy, they were beyond sound. A sailor in leather naval tunic and tight helmet cast off.

A single-deck galley pulled into the wharf beside them, close enough for the oars to scrape their leeward quarter. The little galley began to take on more desperate survivors. In the other boat Max, at the tiller, guided the sailing vessel out into deeper water. Behind them, Lysandra saw an enormous ball, bright as sunlight, fall through the sky, exploding in the middle of the galley among the luckless rowers and refugees. The boat blazed, carrying a brief glow like midday sunlight before it crashed back into the wharf.

Watching the tragedy of the other boat, Lysandra hid her face in her crossed arms.

The little sailing vessel commandeered by Max sailed out across the bay. Sometime during the voyage Lysandra felt Max's hand on her head. She made no response. With her

eyes closed her thoughts became blurred between past and present.

Some time later the vessel bumped against another stone quai. There were movements around her: other refugees being helped out. Flavius' young voice:

"Oh! It's day again."

Max assuring him gently, "Yes, my boy."

Lysandra felt her body lifted up, started to protest, and heard her own voice speaking again after all the abortive efforts. Hoarse and squawking, but certainly her own voice: "Max." She was in his arms, close against his breast. His own reassurance came, dear and gentle:

"It's Max. You are safe now, *carissima*. It's all over."

He carried her onto a wharf. She could hear his sandals on the sun-baked wood. She felt a burning sensation across her eyes, so bright she cried out. "The fires!"

Max said, "Open your eyes. Slowly."

She did so and began to laugh. The hysteria relieved her. That great, terrifying red ball of fire she saw now was the sunset. Above it a smoky sky spread out to the west.

Behind her, across the bay to the south and east, the world remained shrouded in sulfurous dusk, the mountain on the distant horizon shooting out great whirlwinds of fire that only made the regions beyond the fires darker still. There were no green slopes visible on Vesuvius, only rivers of molten flame.

Lysandra saw that Max too stared back at the holocaust. She knew he was remembering his old comrade, and perhaps Ancaris as well. Then he smiled faintly and encouraged her, "Look ahead, my love. We need never look back again. Flavius has the right idea."

The boy had been set down and was stumbling slowly beside the sailor who held his hand. He pointed out, "Look. It's day again."

To Lysandra it seemed strange and wonderful to think it was still daylight, still the same sultry August day of Emperor Titus' visit to the villa.

Surely a lifetime had passed since the banquet.

Max must have understood her thoughts. He held her tightly against his body, from which half the tunic had burned away, but the breast armor and tall metal greaves on his legs and arms had saved him from worse burns. They needed no words between them. A small, precious world had been destroyed. But they were closer than they had ever been since their meeting long ago in Lutetia.